[Mr. Corbyn]

relations work—there is still significant under-reporting of racial attacks in London? Therefore, while I welcome the fact that the police are now taking such crimes more seriously, I think that we still have a long way to go, especially in encouraging desk constables and sergeants immediately to ask the person reporting an assault whether he or she believes it to have been racially motivated. That is the basis of the definition according to which reporting should take place.

Mr. Hattersley: I agree with my hon. Friend—indeed, I hope that my agreement was implicit in my point that the apparent increase in recorded incidents is due to the fact that the question should be asked and is being asked. I am sure that he and I would also agree that it is right to offer our congratulations to the Met for beginning to face up to the problem and trying to overcome it if it possibly can.

I also commend and congratulate the Commissioner on the paragraphs of his report in which he expresses his belief that the Metropolitan police should play a proper part in the creation of a multiracial society. The increase in recruitment of officers from the ethnic minorities is warmly to be welcomed. I understand that such officers now represent about 9 per cent. of the intake, and that applicants represent an even larger percentage. The Commissioner says in his report that he hopes that more and more of the black and Asian British will look upon policing as a worthwhile occupation.

For what it is worth, I want to add my urgings on that very point. If the police are properly to represent all sections of society, two things must happen. First, the police must understand their role in a multiracial society. That is happening more and more. Secondly, members of the minorities must apply to join the police in greater numbers. I certainly hope that they will and I urge them to do so.

Let me now deal with a related matter—the proposals and suggestions made tentatively by the Commissioner on the subject of marches undertaken with the intention of malign provocation. The Commissioner is understandably frustrated by the activities of what he describes as organisations which "lay a siege from within" to the community but do it in such a way and do it with such comparatively small numbers that he is not justified in calling for the prohibition of the activity but nevertheless has to use large numbers of officers to hold down what is certainly racial provocation.

As the Commissioner rightly says, although the officers can prevent a breach of the peace, they cannot prevent the racial disturbance that inevitably results. I understand exactly why the Commissioner proposes that some special action might be taken. I also understand why he states at the end of his recommedations that civil liberty questions need to be answered. For my part, I hope that the discussions that he proposes will take place, in the hope that we shall be able to do something to end such activities without the unacceptable infringement of civil liberties.

Part I of the report is devoted to the PLUS programme, which seems to me admirable, both in concept and execution. That programme, too, is related to partnership within the community. The idea of partnership is set out in the statement of common purpose and values, and it is important that we should give the Metropolitan police the opportunity to implement the provisions of that statement and the resources that they need for that purpose.

I hope that the Under-Secretary will answer a specific question on that subject. Some devotees of sector policing within the Met advocate with great enthusiasm the idea of having teams of officers responsible for an area continually for 24 hours, but they are now expressing doubts about whether sufficient manpower is available to operate such a system.

Will the team approach to a sector mean that officers are not available for other essential duties particularly emergency calls? Will the Home Secretary tell us something about that, particularly as I understand that, last week, he announced an extra 1,000 police officers—I was going to say to be recruited, but I am not sure whether that is so, because the Home Secretary has a habit of renouncing earlier announcements of extra police officers.

With regard to recruitment, unless extra resources are made available, many police authorities, as is now the case, will not expand up to establishment because they will not be able to afford the cost. However, I understand that, of those 1,000 extra officers, none are for the Met. If the Minister can confirm that, I hope that he will also tell us whether he believes that the PLUS programme can be carried out without extra resources.

The PLUS programme relates to the Met in particular because there are areas where the concept of staffing allocation is beginning to worry the local communities which co-operate strongly and enthusiastically with the police. I have been told that the consultation group in Holloway, which rejoices in its success in co-operating with the police, is depressed by the fact that a 10 per cent. reduction in crime has also resulted in a 10 per cent. reduction in resources available to fight crime. If the Minister can tell us something about the general staffing levels and the pressure, we might—although I am not altogether convinced that we shall—be reassured.

I want to raise several other questions before I refer to a subject which, having been mentioned in passing last year, excited more attention than anything else that we debated when we considered this subject last year. Can we hear something about the use of police cells for remand prisoners? A chief constable to whom I spoke this year said that he welcomed his cells being used for remand prisoners, because the Home Office pumped so much money into his authority for that purpose that he received it in the form of revenue rating; he urged me not to criticise the proposals because he needed the money—*[Interruption.]* The Home Secretary is aware of whom I am speaking.

When pressed, that chief constable agreed that that was a scandalous waste of money. Almost every police authority considers it to be an equally scandalous diversion of scarce manpower. That is not a job that police officers do well. They do not want to do it and they should not be required to do it. They are not turnkeys and they do not have the expert eyes to be professional prison officers.

How many remand prisoners are being held in London police stations? What does that cost? Although it seems almost inconceivable—I have been assured that this is true, and I simply ask the question because the likelihood is so horrific that I hope the allegation will be denied—is pressure on London police stations with remand prisoners to be relieved by postponing various improvements scheduled for Brixton prison? Will those improvements be postponed to put remand prisoners back in those completely intolerable conditions?

On page 20 of his annual report, the Commissioner refers to pressure on resources. As the Home Secretary would not do this formally to the House on Monday, will he tell us something about the proposals for docklands police? Are they to be privatised in some way? Are they to be handed over to the new independent private authority? Are police officers to be replaced by security guards who are badly trained, badly paid and without the necessary powers and qualifications?

Mr. Simon Hughes: I intended to raise that point. One of the straightforward aspects of docklands is that the population of residents and business people has increased considerably. If the answer to the question raised by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) is that there are no extra police for London, the implication for greatly expanding communities is very serious.

Mr. Hattersley: I am sure that the House will want to allow the Minister as much time as he needs to answer those very important questions, and I am sure that he will be specific when he refers to police numbers and to the plans for docklands. The idea of a police force without the training, professional skills and powers of police officers in charge of that area is completely intolerable and should not be acceptable in our society.

Mr. Michael Shersby (Uxbridge): Is the right hon. Gentleman talking about the proposals that relate to the port of Tilbury, as I suspect he is? That is important and I am glad that he has raised the matter. He will be aware that there are two aspects of docklands—the London docks and Tilbury. Tilbury is a separate port and is in Essex.

Mr. Hattersley: I am talking about Tilbury initially, and I fear that the practice with Tilbury might spread. A concept that we have debated in this House in relation to other subjects is creeping privatisation. What might happen in Tilbury could happen elsewhere. I have seen it happen in ports outside London. I visited a port where the police have been replaced by a private security organisation. I met a lady sergeant in charge, and she was kind enough to conduct me around with the management. I asked her how she became a sergeant and she told me that she had become a sergeant because she had done two weeks' training. When I asked her what she had done before her two weeks' training, she told me that she had been on the checkout at Woolworths. That seems inadequate preparation for being a non-commissioned officer in a police force. I do not want that to spread from the provinces into London.

Mr. Terry Dicks (Hayes and Harlington): Surely that is a better qualification for being a Back-Bench Member of the Labour party.

Mr. Hattersley: I am glad that we did not miss that point.

No one doubts the necessity of diplomatic and royal protection being carried out to whatever level or extent is necessary to preserve life and safety. However, the Commissioner's report refers to the enormous increase in manpower involved in such protection over the past year, which I fear, although I hope that I am wrong, will continue.

The Home Secretary must consider whether that protection is a proper charge to be made in any degree or to any percentage on the local authorities which pay towards the upkeep of the Met. Will the Minister tell us whether he believes, as we believe, that the time has come for that charge to be accepted nationally in full rather than for any percentage of it to be placed among the responsibilities of the boroughs concerned?

I want to conclude, with some trepidation, on a point that produced such an avalanche of letters last year; I look forward to my postbag with great disquiet. I refer to traffic movement in London. There are two points about traffic movement in London that are noticeable to those of us who live in the boroughs. The first is the efficiency with which the meter system operates. Those of us who have residents' parking permits are aware that, if we stay on a yellow line after 8.30 or remain by a parking meter after 9.30, we will receive a ticket within 20 minutes and will be clamped within half an hour. I make no complaint about that today, although I have complained about it at 8.30 and 9.30.

The second point that we notice is that, while the meter system operates so efficiently, when we drive through London's arterial roads, we are constantly blocked by commercial vehicles parked on single yellow lines, double yellow lines and traffic junctions which are loading or unloading or dropping passengers. They are now a major cause of traffic jams.

Two thousand years ago, the Romans required carts to be within the city walls only between sunset and sunrise. I do not suggest that that should now happen in London, but a tougher line must be taken against drivers who wilfully park in a way that prevents traffic flow along arterial roads.

Mr. John Bowis (Battersea): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his conversion to the red route concept.

Mr. Hattersley: It is much more than the red route concept. I want to consider the yellow box concept: we could go through the entire spectrum before the debate ends. More action must be taken about the blocking of junctions. I am almost willing to give a prize to any hon. Member who has seen someone prosecuted or stopped for parking on the yellow hatchings in a juction. That is one more thing which is bringing the capital's traffic to a halt.

I make that point with trepidation because I know that the flood of support—not that that is in any way unusual for me—that I will obtain for that idea will make life in my office intolerable next week. However, the point is important for two reasons—the technical necessity of keeping London traffic flowing and the relationship between the people of London and the police. One of the things that irritate the London citizen about police officers whom he or she sees walking along the road is why they are not doing something about those cars. If we are to have the relationship which the Home Secretary and I want, that minor irritation could well do with removal.

I end my remarks as I began, by offering the Metropolitan police the Opposition's congratulations on what, in adverse circumstances, has been a successful year. I promise the Metropolitan police force that, not this year

[Mr. Hattersley]

but in the year beginning, say, early May 1992, there will be resources and support to let it have an even more successful year than it has had until now.

Mr. Kenneth Baker: The right hon. Gentleman is promising more resources in the event of a Labour Government winning the election. When he was a member of the previous Labour Government, when he sat in Cabinet discussing police resources, he actually reported an under-resource for the Metropolitan police, and left the Metropolitan police 4,500 officers under establishment. That was his record in office. That is what the country should remember.

Mr. Hattersley: It was because we believed that there had to be a reorganisation of police pay and police numbers that my right hon. Friend the then Home Secretary and I jointly set up the inquiry into police pay, which was our legacy to the incoming Conservative Government. That inquiry and report were ours. It is an absolute feature of the Home Secretary and his party that they want to fight the battles of 15 years ago—which I suppose is better than losing the battles of next year. If he wants to fight the battles of 15 years ago, I stand absolutely by our record. Our record is crime at half the level that it is today. We will stand by that record.

10.41 am

Sir John Wheeler (Westminster, North): I shall take up some of the points that were made by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley), but first I join my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary in welcoming Sir Peter Imbert back to the commissionership of the Metropolitan police. He is innovative and he commands enormous respect among the people of London as well as members of his own police force.

I welcome this annual debate on policing in London. At the outset, it is important to remind the House that, when we consider the police in London, we naturally think of the Metropolitan police with its record high establishment of 28,364 police officers and its 16,720 civilian staff who are responsible for policing 799 square miles, including the 32 London boroughs and some outer districts as well as Windsor castle. The Metropolitan police force costs an enormous amount of money. The total cost today is £1,286 million and the greater part of that sum comes from the Treasury through the taxpayer.

The other police services of London include the efficient City of London police, with its establishment of 798 police officers and 433 civilians. The British Transport police force is responsible for policing the London underground and it deserves particular credit for an excellent record in crime control and crime prevention.

Although overall crime levels in the Metropolitan police area have risen recently—up 9 per cent. in 1990—statistics for crime on the underground show a fall for the third successive year, most notably in categories involving violence. They are down 23 per cent. on the 1989 figures. Within that category, robbery fell by 12 per cent., assaults by 13 per cent., indecent assaults by 11 per cent. and other sexual offences by 59 per cent.

Crime on the underground needs always to be considered in the context of the numbers travelling. With nearly 800 million journeys every year, the chances of becoming involved in an incident are extremely small. In 1990, fewer than two incidents per 1 million passenger journeys involved violence. It is particularly important to set out that record, because it reduces the sometimes irrational fear of crime on the part of people who use the underground system.

I also pay tribute to members of the Royal Parks constabulary for their excellent work in the royal parks. I know from my experience in the city of Westminster how splendidly they serve a very large tourist population as well as the local residential community.

I now refer to the Labour party's absurd proposition that there should be an elected police authority for London which the right hon. Member for Sparkbrook again confirmed today. *[Interruption.]* I say "absurd" because there is absolutely no evidence of any demand from the public for an elected police authority within the areas of responsibility of the four police forces that I have mentioned. The ambiguity of the Opposition's case for that proposition is remarkable. They have not made it clear whether they envisage their so-called elected police authority being responsible for all police activities in what I presume to be the area of the 32 London boroughs, the City of London and the eight outer districts in the home counties, as well as the Royal Parks police and the British Transport police.

The Labour party must make clear its definition of the composition and responsibility of that supposed police authority. Given that 90 per cent. of expenditure on the police comes from the taxpayer via the Treasury, it is difficult to imagine what the authority would do.

Outside London, police authority arrangements provide for a committee composed of two thirds local government councillors and one third justices of the peace. They are in no way responsible for operational matters; nor can they give directions to chief officers of police. They have a limited responsibility for aspects of the efficient administration of the police service, but even that is questionable and is carried out only in conjunction with the Home Office. Moreover, the police authority system has had a pretty chequered history. There is no evidence that such an authority has even identified or stopped bad working practices or operational failings. This failure to provide objective oversight is most marked when considering the recent West Midlands crime squad saga and the overall incompetence of the Derbyshire police authority.

That the Labour party wants to replicate those arrangements in London is absurd. There is no compelling evidence that the police service arrangements outside London engender any greater confidence in the work of the police; rather, the increasingly effective police consultative arrangements provide that essential local link between the police and the public. The 74 Metropolitan police divisions all have access to the police consultative arrangements and they report increasing public participation in discussing the problems of a local community and the desired style of policing.

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North-West): Will the hon. Gentleman explain why the relationship between the local authority and the police in the City of London, which is a police authority, works very well?

Sir John Wheeler: The City of London, as the hon. Gentleman knows—he wants to abolish it, after all; it is another Labour party pledge—is a unique government unit with a special responsibility. We know very well that we are not comparing like with like in any sense. There are other arguments against an elected police authority——

Mr. Clive Soley (Hammersmith): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Wheeler: I shall not give way, as I should like to press on. The hon. Gentleman may be assisted by my arguments.

Based on the costs of the London borough elections in 1986, the likely cost of holding elections for the 32 London boroughs alone would be about £3 million. The overall turnout in the 1990 London borough elections was 48·2 per cent., but that average masks substantial variations from area to area. At borough level, turnouts ranged from 59·7 per cent. in Richmond to 36·1 per cent. in Hackney. At ward level, turnouts ranged from 68 per cent. in the Barnes ward in Richmond to 18·1 per cent. in the Liddle ward in Southwark. It is likely that the turnout for an unwanted election for an authority for which the public have made no demands at all would be even less. The absurdity of the Labour party's proposal is thus manifest for all to see.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman's argument suggests that both Opposition parties—supported as he knows, by many Londoners—have argued for a separate election for a police authority. But that is not what happens in the rest of England. Members of police authorities are elected at the same time as the members of the other strategic authorities for that area. As it is not a question of separate elections, the hon. Gentleman's argument in his last few sentences was completely specious.

Sir John Wheeler: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman speaks for the Labour party on this point. The opposition parties have not made that point clear; nor have they said whether they envisage all four police service functions in London coming within the jurisdiction of the proposed authority. In addition, they have not made clear the area for which the authority would be responsible. The issue is a good deal more complicated——

Mr. Tony Banks *rose*——

Sir John Wheeler: The hon. Gentleman can make his speech later.

The right hon. Member for Sparkbrook also referred to crime in London. It is a matter of some concern that recorded crime within the Metropolitan police area increased by 11 per cent. in the 12 months from April 1990. The rise is lower than in many police force areas around London, notably Essex, which in June announced a 25 per cent. rise in crime.

It is important to keep the figure in perspective. Recorded crime has increased by an average of 5 per cent. per year since 1970. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred to the increase in recorded crime since the end of the second world war. Some of the increase is due to an increase in the proportion of crimes reported to and recorded by the police. That is particularly true of some violent crime. It should be remembered that that type of crime, which is the most worrying for the public, represents a very small proportion of all recorded crime—about 5 per cent. in London. The vast majority of offences are against property—over half the crimes recorded in London were theft or handling stolen goods.

The increase in recorded crime in London is not the result of any slackening off of police effort—far from it. There have been some significant police achievements over the 12 months covered by the statistics. A higher proportion of rapes have been cleared up. Police operations against street crime have led to a 5 per cent. reduction in such offences. The police have made it a priority to protect the public from serious, predatory crime. It is reasonable to expect the public also to take some responsibility for protecting their property from opportunist theft and vandalism.

It is important to remember that 94 per cent. of the crime problem in London relates to property and especially the motor car. Only one in six offences of violence against a person involves members of the same household, but, significantly, the majority of victims of violence were in some way known or associated with the attacker. The more effective recording of sexual offences reveals that two thirds of the women raped knew their attacker and just under half the women indecently assaulted had a previous acquaintance with their attacker. It is very important for the public to understand the facts. London remains one of the safest cities in the world.

Street crime, such as muggings and bag snatchings, are distressing for the individual and sometimes cause media reports that are either dishonest or selective in their statements and can be the cause of a great deal of fear, especially to elderly women. It is very important for the public to know that two thirds of all mugging victims are male and that male youths in particular account for a large proportion of victims of such crimes. Elderly women are the least likely victims of mugging. Most of those offences take place in the early to mid-afternoon and not after dark as is often supposed.

As my right hon. Friend said, the Metropolitan police are increasingly successful at detecting crime. No. 1 area, which I visited recently to discuss with the deputy assistant commissioner his own success story there, has carried out several operations with remarkable results. The DAC told me that those achievements were made only because of the total co-operation of the local community in all its forms and were especially due to the high morale of the Metropolitan police officers. The notion that the police are in any way lacking in morale is absolute humbug. Their record of achievement would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and dedication of the police themselves, or without the increasing support that they receive from the civilian members of their staff.

Car crime is a particular problem. The Metropolitan police say that more than 75,000 cars are taken and driven away, of which half are fairly easily recovered. The problem is that a quarter of those vehicles are taken and the contents stolen because the driver had not locked the doors. While there is increasing effort on the part of motor manufacturers to improve car security, the public are often careless in the treatment of their possessions. More must be done to deal with car crime.

The costs to the taxpayer of car crime are enormous and are not effectively calculated. I refer, for example, to the correlation between car thefts and accidents. In December 1988, the Home Office working group on car crime recommended some analysis of that point. I understand from the Department of Transport that some

[Sir John Wheeler]

data are being analysed at the moment and that the first results should be available in a couple of months. I am sorry to find that no work has been done by academics on that aspect of car crime, yet there are clear costs to the health service and the insurance industry and a great deal of misery to the public.

It is difficult to give a clear figure of the costs of car crime and I am not aware of a direct updating of the 1984 British crime survey estimate that the net loss sustained by the private motorist from car crime was £270 million. The Home Office produces annual estimates of the value of property stolen in crime recorded by the police. The latest figures for 1989 show that the value of property stolen as theft of a vehicle or from a vehicle totals £1,099 million, of which about £620 million is recovered, leaving a net loss of £471 million. Insurance claims for motor theft in the United Kingdom in 1989 totalled about £291 million. But because such crime is unrecorded the overall net loss to the public may be in the region of £550 million to £600 million. I welcome the fact that 1992 is to be car crime year. We require an innovative—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry that Opposition Members seem to think that car crime is amusing.

I think that we require an innovative approach——

Mr. Corbyn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Wheeler: No, I shall not give way.

An innovative approach should be taken to the problem. Most such crimes are committed by a minority of youths. The clear-up rate is low and one way to improve it might be to make the service provided by scenes of crime officers a contracting one. For a modest fee of about £25 such a service could provide an avalanche of forensic information which, through the use of information technology and computerisation, could provide the police with a welter of intelligence.

Mr. Simon Hughes: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you have been given any sign that—if not now, at the end of business—there might be a statement from a Transport Minister on how the Government propose to respond to the letter from the European Environment Commissioner and the consequence for the seven projects that the European Commission believes contravene European law and environmental policy?

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Eltham): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As Member of Parliament for the district in which one of the projects is located may I re-emphasise the fact that the House expects to hear, either today or in the remaining days of this Session next week, how the Government intend to respond. This is one of the last chances to save Oxleas wood and some of the other projects.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Miss Betty Boothroyd): No Minister has been in touch with the Speaker's Office to inform Mr. Speaker that he or she would like to make a statement on the matter today.

Sir John Wheeler: I am on the point of concluding my proposal on how to improve the clear-up rate of car crime, which represents about one third of crime in this country. We need an improvement in forensic evidence to enable police to make arrests through the better use of the skills of scenes of crime officers. If that evidence were available, the police would be given a welter of information which would give them the opportunity to improve the clear-up rate as it is only a minority of youths who are responsible for the large number of car crimes.

Bold thinking is necessary to deal with car crime. The traditional approach which fails to place greater emphasis on the responsibility of the vehicle's user must be the right way forward.

11.4 am

Mr. Ron Leighton (Newham, North-East): I do not think it is possible for us to discuss law and order, justice and policing today without reflecting on the sombre backdrop which overshadows the debate. When I was at school I was brought up to believe that British justice was the best and finest in the world and the envy of people of other lands, but I have been shocked to discover that that is no longer true. There has been case after case involving appalling miscarriages of justice, and innocent men and women being imprisoned for many years. How fortunate it is that we do not have the dealth penalty. How fortunate it is for the Guildford Four and Birmingham Six that we do not have the death penalty. In those cases, crucial alibi evidence was withheld from the defence, police concocted statements, suppressed interviews and produced false confessions, the forensic evidence was useless and senior judges ended up with egg on their faces. All of that must shake confidence, and there are other similar events lodged in the public psyche.

The case in the west midlands that has been mentioned involved 52 officers who were purged as a result of allegations of malpractice. Evidence was fabricated by their serious crimes squad, which had to be dismantled. In Kent there was doctoring of crime clearance figures. There are worries about the influence of freemasonry. There were criticisms of the Taylor report on the policing of the Hillsborough disaster. We cannot deny that such incidents have a cumulative damaging effect on trust and confidence.

Another factor that has caused damage and in which I am sure that the police would have preferred not to be involved has been the role that they have played in industrial disputes. Until the 1970s the police role in industrial disputes was confined to preserving peace and upholding the law. The police were supposed to be impartial and to show no bias for employers or employees. If substitute labour was needed, troops were called in. In the ambulance dispute, however, police were called in to replace ambulance men. That has worrying implications for the independent status of the police and raises substantial legal problems.

Another factor involved the use of police in the mining dispute, particularly at Orgreave, where the South Yorkshire police have paid £500,000 in damages and costs to 39 miners whom they injured outside the Orgreave coking plant. No policemen were prosecuted. At Wapping, investigations by Northampton police led to charges of conspiracy to pervert the course of justice and accusations of various assaults and brutality. On the grounds of what I believe was described as "delay" the case was discharged, and there were no prosecutions. Patently, justice was not seen to be done. All such incidents drive a wedge between the police and the public.

Mr. Tony Banks: In relation to Chief Superintendent Wirco of the Northampton police, who conducted the inquiry and the ensuing "delay", was not that delay caused by the police refusing to give evidence to their own officer investigating the case?

Mr. Leighton: I believe that that is so. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks) gave evidence to the inquiry and, certainly, justice was not seen to be done. The matter was well summed up be a senior police officer, quoted in the *Observer* on 8 September this year, who said:

> "I know from talking to my own children and those of my colleagues just how deep the animosity goes. I think we may be reaping the results of our own mistreatment of the young in the 1970s and 1980s: we were too hostile, too aggressive, too islolated. Then we did begin to get our act together after Brixton, but we spoilt it again with the miners' strike and Wapping.
>
> We were placed in hostile confrontation with the public. The new emphasis on service that you see in initiatives like the Met's Plus Programme is an attempt to close the gulf. But it is going to be a long job."

This week saw the publication of a book by Robert Reiner, a London School of Economics law lecturer, who interviewed 40 of the 43 chief officers. In it he says that one of them said to him:

> "The miners' strike did more harm for police-public relations than many people would be prepared to admit to. . . . The main reason was the public getting used to seeing police officers in riot gear, 'facing the people'.
>
> They saw police officers being injured, they saw police officers inflicting injuries and it's commonplace now."

Policing is becoming increasingly complex. It is important in our modern industrial societies that we maintain law and order and have an effective police service. I believe that there is widespread support and respect for the police, and I agree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) said on the subject. I also support the police. However, it would be unwise complacently to ignore the trend in some quarters where there is an erosion of that respect and confidence. It would be unwise to ignore the perhaps growing minority who no longer place complete trust in the police. I have explained some of the reasons for that, and there are others.

We meet some of the disenchanted people in our surgeries. Many of those who come to see me believe that police performance against crime is poor—they are referring to the low clear-up rate. Many people tell me that in the east end of London they think it is hardly worth reporting crimes, including robberies, to the police because the response is either inept or inadequate. There is a great deal of dissatisfaction among constituents. There is also a virtually complete lack of faith in the police complaints procedure. I have not met one constituent who is happy with the result after he or she has made a complaint.

I shall now move on to the present wave of crime. At the last election, the Conservative party masqueraded as the party of law and order, trumpeting simplistic nostrums. It claimed that it knew how to crack down on crime and promised to do so. It must now be cringing with embarrassment as it recalls its bogus prospectives of 1979. The only growth area of the economy has been in crime. The 12 years of Conservative rule have produced the circumstances which have led to the worst crime wave in British history. Of all the Tory failures, this must be among the biggest and we are all paying the price.

Mr. Soley: I also remember the Tory promise, "We must cut crime", which appeared on posters in my area. It is interesting to note that at that stage and, indeed, during the past three general elections they constantly blamed criminals and others in society whereas now, as we heard today from the hon. Member for Westminster, North (Sir J. Wheeler), they blame the victims for not doing enough to look after their property and themselves. It is the victims' fault. That is an incredible failure.

Mr. Leighton: As usual, the Government blame the victims. They scapegoat parents or schools. They blame everyone but themselves, yet they have been in office now for 12 years. What have they achieved? The doubling of crime: in 1979 there were 2·2 million recorded offences, but 5 million are projected for 1991. That is the steepest increase in crime in history. It is an epidemic. We have had two years of 18 per cent. increases and there is no end in sight.

On Wednesday the Police Federation said:

> "Britain is in real danger of losing the battle against crime."

Metropolitan police Sergeant Alan Eastwood, the chairman of the federation representing 147,000 police officers, said:

> "It took 20 years for the crime rate to rise from one million to two million offences a year. It has taken just 10 years"—

10 years of Conservative Government—

> "for the figure to go from two to five million."

For 12 years the Tory party worshipped a Prime Minister who said that there was no such thing as society but only individuals—it was everyone for himself. The rich have been loaded with wealth, but those at the bottom have been shut out, excluded and left to rot. Britain is divided as never before between conspicuous wealth and chronic poverty and despair. Those are the conditions which breed crime, and they have.

The Conservatives are creating just such a society, inflicting chronic mass unemployment and are depriving hundreds of thousands of young people of hope and a future. Yet they expect sweetness and light. How can they think that mass unemployment will have no effect on crime? Only the stupid would think that mass unemployment would have no effect on crime. Of course mass unemployment undermines and destroys the fabric of society. One has only to look at what mass unemployment is doing in east Germany. Only a Conservative like the Home Secretary would think anything else. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook said, all the research shows a correlation between the increase in property crime and the increase in recession.

The 1980s were a Tory decade when for the first time the Government held out no hope for millions of people. Many people's incomes and benefits did not keep up with inflation. After 12 years, people are worse off in absolute terms. They are kept in poverty while others enrich themselves. For the whole of the 1980s we had more than 2 million unemployed. People say that we had unemployment in the 1930s and that it did not lead to crime, but in the 1930s finding a solution to unemployment was at the top of the political agenda. Under the Thatcher Government we were told that unemployment was a price well worth paying. The attitude was different. When the present Prime Minister was Chancellor of the Exchequer

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he said that if it was not hurting it was not working. As a result, we have an underclass who have little to lose by committing crime.

Crime is not prevented by having lots of policemen. The inhibition to crime is social control. People do not want to commit crimes and be convicted because of what other people may think. What will people think of them at work? Will they lose their job? But if they do not have a job, have never had a job and will never get a job, they think, "What the hell—what does it matter?" Those people have no perspective on the future, so it does not matter.

It does not surprise me that in those circumstances there are riots every summer. The only surprise to me is that we do not have more. The police understand this even if the Home Secretary does not. Lord Scarman reported on what he described as the tinder in our inner cities waiting for a spark. Kenneth Newman spoke of the volatile vapour of social discontent hanging over the city, looking for a spark to set it off—usually an innocent or inept act by the police. Unfortunately, the police are often seen as the enemy—the representatives of the system. It is not the fault of the police—it is the fault of the Government.

Even Members of Parliament tend to get fractious at the end of the summer, and they go on holiday. How many of the kids who took part in the riots had a holiday? They do not get one. That is part of the reason for the riots.

More than a decade ago, when unemployment first reached 1 million, I thought that there would be disturbances. When unemployment rose to 2 million I heard a Labour Member say that it was unacceptable. The right hon. Member for Chingford (Mr. Tebbit) replied that it was not unacceptable because it was being accepted. He suggested that we did not have to worry that we had 2 million unemployed. He was wrong. We have had riots every summer when there has been a spark. We also have what I would call a slow riot, a sort of permanent slow riot where the tinder does not explode but smoulders. The word to describe that is "crime"—the present crime epidemic is a slow riot.

In the 1930s the perception was that everybody was suffering and that we all suffered together. Everybody was in the same boat. Now, areas of poverty and unemployment with an alienated, excluded underclass are surrounded by areas of relative affluence and car ownership. That is the difference between now and the 1930s. Obviously, there is a connection between unemployment and crime. Crime has increased most in areas where employment has collapsed. If hon. Members do not believe that, they should ask the insurance companies. The insurance companies know where crime is highest, so insurance premiums are highest in the poorest areas.

What can we do to help the police? One idea stands out immediately. The Home Secretary referred to the PLUS programme. Commander Alec Marnoch of Scotland Yard's PLUS programme, which aims to achieve better relations with the public, said:

> "An elected authority is a logical extension of the partnership and co-operation that has been going on at borough level. We would welcome such a body, which could reflect the priorities of the community."

That is the view of the senior Scotland Yard officer and of all the senior police officers with whom I have discussed the matter. That is the quickest single thing that we could do to improve matters. Her Majesty's inspectorate of police and the Police Federation have said that they would work happily with an elected authority.

The police believe that an elected authority is essential if they are to establish a proper working relationship with the public. Opinion polls show that the majority of Londoners support such an elected authority. I know that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, is a thoughtful man and I am sure that he would accept that such an authority is in line with the citizens charter—that public servants should be answerable to the public. After all, all power in a democratic society should be accountable.

Such a body would not have day-to-day operational powers. The national powers of Scotland Yard relating to anti-terrorism and to diplomatic and royalty protection would remain the responsibility of the Home Secretary, but the authority would have the same powers as authorities outside London to make appointments at senior level and it would have a policy and budgetary role; it would supervise complaints, investigate deaths in police custody and be responsible for monitoring equal opportunities policy. As a safeguard, the Commissioner would have a right of appeal to the Home Secretary. If that happened, the police would be more in touch and it would increase confidence and trust between the police and the people.

I hope that no one would be so silly as to suggest that the establishment of such an authority would somehow introduce politics into the matter. After all, what is the Home Secretary if not a politician? I admit, however, that I have heard him described otherwise. The constitutional position of the Metropolitan police is completely anomalous and unsatisfactory. The notion that it is somehow accountable to the Home Secretary is preposterous. That is a patent absurdity. The right hon. Gentleman cannot pretend to have a detailed knowledge of its work. The idea that this annual debate on a Friday morning represents adequate parliamentary scrutiny in ludicrous. An elected authority for London, as proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparbrook would be good for the police, for the public and for the joint war against crime.

11.22 am

Mr. David Evennett (Erith and Crayford): I am grateful for this opportunity to participate in such an important debate, not only because it is a subject that concerns and interests my constituents, but because it is about London. As a Londoner who represents part of the great metropolis, I believe that the House does not spend enough time debating London issues, and today we are attempting to redress that balance. Regrettably, London issues are too often regarded as national issues. That is often true, but matters concerning the police and transport are specific to the capital and our region.

I regret the superficial approach adopted by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley), whose speech did not address any of the issues that affect our great capital city. The right hon. Gentleman's plan for the establishment of an elected police authority is not a major issue that is raised regularly by my constituents. They are concerned not only about finding and punishing criminals, but about preventing crime. An elected police authority would not undertake either of those functions.

When we debate the policing of our capital city, the first thing we must all state is that the Metropolitan police has a high reputation in London, throughout the country and across the world. The Metropolitan police provides the services of the anti-terrorist branch not only to the people of London, but of the nation. The work of the Metropolitan police must be commended.

I do not agree with the hon. Member for Newham, North-East (Mr. Leighton) in his attacks on various aspects of police work and Government policy. There are many reasons for increased crime, and easy generalisations will not hold up; nor will they get us further in our debate on how to improve the lives of citizens in this great city and to prevent crime.

I believe that the hon. Member for Newham, North-East has a strange view of history. The 1930s saw far greater inequalities of wealth, and there were fewer opportunities and less choice and educational opportunity for the vast majority. To suggest that the poor and the unemployed are more likely to be criminals is absolutely insulting to them and their families. Just because one is poor and unemployed does not mean that one immediately commits a crime. The vast majority of people in the capital are good, law-abiding citizens, and they remain so whether they are unemployed or not.

Mr. Soley: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says, but he does not understand the argument, because the comparison with the 1930s is extremely important. As society and community structures break down, so do families. That was not the cases in the 1930s. Social breakdown includes the effects of unemployment and low income, and if the hon. Gentleman does not address all the relevant issues he will not understand the argument, never mind be able to make moral judgments. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the poor and unemployed, as individuals, are not more likely to commit crime, but the fracturing of families and communities, as the Church and others have noted, is a major factor.

Mr. Evennett: There are many reasons for crime in society, but the answers are not as superficial as the hon. Member suggests.

I have always been a great supporter of the police and, in common with the vast majority of my constituents, I believe that our police force does a tremendous job. Regrettably, too often the media, the experts and Opposition Members take the police for granted—sometimes we all do—and fail to recognise the many varied and difficult jobs that they must undertake.

The vast majority of Londoners warmly support the police in all their duties. I disagree with the hon. Member for Newham, North-East, who suggested that the public opinion of the police in London was diminished as a result of what happened during the miners' strike. That is arrant nonsense.

I believe that any debate on policing in London must concentrate on two different features of police work. Of course the policing of central London and the inner-city areas is one such feature of police work. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, in his excellent speech, highlighted the tremendous number of new initiatives that are being implemented in those inner-city areas by the Metropolitan police. My right hon. Friend highlighted the successes already achieved and the determination of the Metropolitan police that those initiatives should be effective.

The other part of London is made up of the suburbs, of which my constituency is part. The suburbs have different priorities and require different policing methods. This morning, I want to concentrate on the policing of those suburban areas and to highlight a number of issues relating to policing in my borough of Bexley.

My constituency is served by two police districts. One ward, a small part of my constituency, Thamesmead East, is policed from Plumstead, while the majority of my constituency is under the supervision of Bexleyheath police station. I have visited both chief superintendents and police stations regularly during the past eight years to discuss policing matters. I have also been in regular correspondence about individual problems.

I believe that we must congratulate the Government and my right hon. Friend and his ministerial team on the tremendous increase in expenditure on the police in the past decade, which has led to better pay, better equipment and facilities. I have seen such improvements in my area. On 17 May, I visited the brand new, modern-designed and well-equipped police station at Plumstead, and I toured the building with Chief Superintendent John Philpott. I spent some time in the magnificent operations room and watched the police in action from their nerve centre. I was impressed by the work being done and the equipment in the new police station. Money is clearly being spent in London to fight crime. New equipment for the police and greater manpower are vital.

My day with the police reinforced my understanding of the twin approach that they must adopt in the fight against crime in suburbia. They need increased technology to fight crime and apprehend the hardened criminal, but they must also have policemen on the beat to reassure the public and deter the petty criminal. On both counts, the work that I saw being carried out from Plumstead was impressive and reassuring.

As I said, the majority of my constituency is policed from Bexleyheath police station, which regrettably is a small, overcrowded and inadequate headquarters designed for policing in another era, probably the 1930s, the time to which Opposition Members are fond of referring.

I am delighted to report that a brand-new police station is being built in Bexleyheath and will shortly be ready. That will give Bexleyheath the same facilities, equipment and accommodation as Plumstead. The police and public are looking forward eagerly to the completion of the new building.

I visited the present building in June this year and met Chief Superintendent Dave Mellish, the Bexleyheath police chief to whom the Home Secretary referred to as an example of the new breed of police head in London, a man of great talent, leadership and ability. My meeting with him was interesting, and our discussion cordial. I welcomed his plans, to which I shall come. But since that meeting, Chief Superintendent Mellish has been promoted and will be leaving the area later this month to further his career in Northumbria. Regrettably, he will have served for only about a year in Bexleyheath.

That is indicative of the problem of policing suburban London. Good men and women with experience and flair, such as Dave Mellish, hardly have time to get to know their areas before being moved on. The result is that they

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do not see their proposals being implemented before departing for a different part of the country. Dave Mellish is becoming assistant chief constable of Northumbria. I fear that changes of that sort have been all to frequent in Bexleyheath.

Mr. Soley: Oh, dear.

Mr. Evennett: The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Mr. Soley) should stop mumbling and listen. He might learn something. The number of changes that have occurred in my area in recent years cannot be good for the local force, or the community on fighting crime. Other local notables, such as councillors, justices of the peace and Churchmen, continue to serve longer periods and to get involved in their areas.

Mr. Leighton: And MPs.

Mr. Evennett: Yes. At least the hon. Gentleman and I can agree on something this morning.

The Home Secretary and I support the need for greater contact between the community and the police. That involves local authorities and others who believe in the community and are anxious to fight crime. We must encourage people to stay in positions of authority longer, so that they have time to become part of the community. I hope that the ambitious plans that were explained to me by Chief Superintendent Mellish will be implemented by his successor, Bob Bligh, when he takes over shortly. Dave Mellish's ideas highlight the way forward for the policing of suburban areas such as mine.

It is essential in the suburbs to establish a police presence which can be responsible to communities. Policemen and women must remain in touch with local people and circumstances. The aim in Bexley is to have a new superstation at Bexleyheath and to establish satellite stations across the remainder of the police district. Those stations will be more user-friendly, making the police more accessible to local people of all ages. The investment should result in more public support and, one hopes, more effective action against crime.

We already have such satellite stations in Belvedere and Erith in my constituency. The new plans call for a further station in my home area of Crayford. The residents, business people and all concerned in Crayford are looking forward to their new police shop, for which there has been a campaign for some time. The shop will be an invaluable asset in the policing of the area.

The home beat officer is another important feature of policing suburbia. We are fortunate in my area in having some dedicated and effective home beat officers. I attended in September the annual general meeting of Larner road tenants association, where I learned that the local officer had a regular surgery on the estate every week and was well known to the residents. He is not just available to them but is trusted and treated as a friend. The estate is only one part of that home beat officer's patch. His community involvement elsewhere is equally effective.

An officer who is known by name and is regularly visible on foot in an area, accessible to people with problems, is bound to help reduce crime in residential areas. It is important that officers visit schools, meet the kids and get to know them by name and become trusted by them. Home beat officers can quickly get to know all aspects of the local community and become aware of what the kids are doing in their spare time, including Saturday nights.

We hear much criticism of the young these days, and I accept that there are troublemakers. Fortunately, in my part of the world we do not suffer greatly from that problem. My young constituents are good, the home beat officers are getting to know them and are visiting youth clubs and elsewhere where the young are having fun. We regard that as vital to the policing of my area.

The most publicised crimes are always the most horrendous. The awful crimes described by the Home Secretary and my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster, North (Sir J. Wheeler) are to be deplored. The major problems for my constituents are the so-called routine crimes such as burglary, car theft and vandalism. Such crimes are, of course, more numerous and, for the individual, more personal.

The detection rate is the most important statistic, detection being the greatest deterrent to crime. Under Conservative rule, there has been a tremendous investment in technology, and that will help the police catch criminals. Hopefully, tough sentences will then be given to the convicted. Regrettably, in this decade, as in the 1930s through to the 1980s, hardened criminals will always be part of society. Sin will always exist. But detection and punishment will help remove such offenders from our streets. We must aim as a top priority to detect and punish them.

The appearance of policemen and women on the streets and of police cars patrolling suburban areas and shopping centres will not eradicate the activities of the hardened criminal, but it will go a long way to deterring the casual criminal. Regrettably, casual crime has greatly increased in recent years. We can do something about it, and a noticeable police presence is one of the most effective means. We shall see the fruits of that type of policing in years to come.

We all have property that we wish to protect. We must do more to look after it. That can be of great assistance in the prevention of crime. Even so, the most important tool is an effective police force apprehending criminals.

The police have a difficult dual role; their job can be difficult and dangerous. I know that the Government and the majority of hon. Members strongly support them in their difficult job. More money has been spent on the police, attempts have been made in the media to publicise how people can protect their property, and there are more policemen on the beat.

Law and order and the defence of the realm are the two most important issues that any Government must address. I believe that the Government are doing so and that the new initiatives to fight crime that they are taking with the police will ensure that the crime rate declines. It is an indictment of our society that the crime rate is so high, but with an effective police force, which we have in London, with good and effective investment in the police force and with community involvement we shall beat crime. In next year's debate, when the effectiveness of the investment in new measures will have worked through, I look forward not only to congratulating the police but to a declining crime rate.

11.40 am

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey): I am glad to be able to participate again in a debate on policing in London. However, like other Opposition Members, I do not regard it as an adequate substitute for an accountable body whereby the people of London and their elected representatives can be the police authority for the capital.

As the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) rightly said, it is impossible for one person—a Cabinet Minister—to be the police authority of London. That is not a reflection on the holder of that office; it is an unmanageable job. London would be happier—the opinion polls bear this out and I dissent from what the hon. Member for Westminster, North (Sir J. Wheeler) said—with an elected police authority and that increasingly appears to be the view of the police force in London. However, for today, we must make the best of the substitute.

I welcome the Commissioner, Sir Peter Imbert, back to his job. We are glad and relieved that he has recovered from his heart attak.

In almost all respects, the police do a good job for us in London for which we are grateful. The senior police and the more junior officers with whom we have daily dealings are effective in almost every respect and helpful, co-operative and courteous.

Like other colleagues, I have cause to be thankful for our local chief superintendents. We have three in Southwark—David Martin, Bill Griffiths and Bob Davies —all of whom are relatively new to the job. We have lost two senior police officers. One, Alan Evershed, who is much missed, moved to a job in the diplomatic protection squad and the other, Bob Keevil, held the responsible job of community liaison officer for Southwark for many years. He retired last Friday night, when many people congratulated him on the work that he had done.

Happily, I detect that the turnround of senior officers has slowed a little. The Home Secretary said that it is intended that that will increasingly be the case. It is no good just getting used to senior officers only for them to move, and they cannot be expected to learn each new job quickly. It was unfortunate that Bexleyheath's police chief was moved after such a short time in post, but that says something about his merit. As nobody has answered the unasked question, he is indeed the son of my predecessor, as the Member of Parliament for Bermondsey, Bob Mellish. He has had a very good policing reputation in the Met.

It is noticeable from the Commissioner's report that the number of complaints lodged against the police in the past year was down, which says something about the responsiveness of the police force throughout the capital. It is also noticeable how many police officers do a job that is above and beyond the call of duty—saving lives, rescuing people and resisting dangerous and threatening attacks. Two young officers in Southwark, one of whom was a cadet and therefore deserves a higher tribute, were recently held up by somebody with a gun. It turned out to be unloaded, but they were not to know that. Bravely and calmly, they managed to get themselves out of that situation.

In saying how good the police are, however, may I issue one word of warning? The hon. Member for Newham, North-East (Mr. Leighton) said that sometimes the police still go over the lines of proper activity. People have been convicted but released on appeal when it has been shown that the police fell into the trap of concocting evidence, which is unacceptable. No police officer should think that he or she will get away with concocting evidence to lock up or to arrest people without having proper cause for believing that they are guilty. It is no excuse to say that it improves their statistics. Constituents of mine—none of us can know in advance whether innocence or guilt is the appropriate result—who have vigorously protested their innocence have been vindicated on appeal. For example, there was the well-known successful appeal in the past year of Tommy McCrossen; such cases do the police no good.

On general strategy, I have mentioned accountability and I hope that by this time next year we shall be well on the way to changing the system and introducing a London police authority, but at a local level there is continuing concern that local police buildings might be lost. The operational building strategy in south-east London has not reached a conclusion. Chief superintendents have said, "Don't worry, you will not lose any buildings." We had to fight hard to save Tower Bridge police station and I make the obvious point that our constituents make to us all the time: close a police building and you not only risk the wrath of the community but do a disservice to the community. The community wants visible policing—police officers being in the area and in and out of community institutions—and a police station nearby so that officers can attend incidents quickly.

I welcome the idea of sector policing. It is a good idea as the police will be more responsive to the changes in demand on their services, but it will not be possible to police growing areas of London with the same number of officers. As Ministers know, docklands, north and south of the river, is growing, so we shall need more police. Increases in police numbers were announced recently, but apparently none are for London and I hope that the Home Secretary and the Minister of State will reflect on that. I do not want to pinch anybody else's police officers, but we need more officers, because without them docklands will not be adequately policed.

I applaud the police for increasing recruitment from the ethnic minorities. Considerable progress has been made in the past year, and I hope that that will continue. If the police are to have the confidence of members of the ethnic minorities, it is important that they come from those minorities. At last we are making progress.

As other colleagues have said, however, the police are not helped by the fact that they must hold prisoners in police cells. In a letter dated 16 October from the Minister of State—the right hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Mrs. Rumbold)—I was told:

> "Our latest figures show the average cost of keeping an inmate in a police cell to be £221 per inmate per day, compared to £46 per day for inmates in a Prison Service establishment."

There is no doubt that that is a ridiculous waste of public money. The need to hold prisoners in police cells interferes with the normal policing job. I know that there are Government commitments, but I plead with the Government to move into proper prison accommodation all those people who are being held in unsatisfactory facilities, who also impede the police in the execution of their duty.

The Home Secretary rightly made great play of the importance of partnership. I welcome the recognition of our police consultative committee in Southwark. It

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provides a good forum, which I attend as regularly as possible, although last night I could not because I was waiting for an Adjournment debate. The partnerships offered by local police forums, police consultative committees and meetings with businesses are vital.

I reiterate a comment that I made yesterday: we cannot have an effective policing relationship with young people if there is no youth service with which to have such a partnership. The figures show that a high percentage of crime in the metropolis is committed by young people. The Commissioner's figures show that in 1990 there were 116,000 notifiable offences, of which about 46,000, or over one third, were committed by people aged between 10 and 20. As the Minister knows, some very young people are involved in such crimes. We must ensure that a good youth service is part of the equation. If the cuts in the youth service in London this coming year are as great as they were last year, we shall be asking for more trouble. Last night, the Minister for Sport announced his willingness to consider meeting people in the youth service about what could be done with the service in inner London. I hope that action is taken. Effective, detached youth work on the streets is often one of the best ways of preventing youngsters from falling into a pattern of crime.

The Government cannot argue logically or credibly that increased unemployment does not mean increased crime. Of course, there is no simple link between the two, but over the decades there has been a statistical pattern. It is self-evident that young people with nothing to do and no regular income are vulnerable targets. That can be seen all the time in places such as Southwark in the car thefts, burglaries and sometimes worse crimes that occur. If people are occupied, they do not succumb to the temptation to commit crime or want the thrill and excitement of committing crime.

During the past year, south London has suffered from an undesirable reputation. Two murders were committed in Southwark division in the period of the Commissioner's last report. So far this year, there have been eight murders in the Southwark police division and five murders in the Carter street police division, a considerable proportion of which have not been solved. One of those murdered was Jonathan Putt—I knew him and his family well. Unfortunately, the conclusions drawn by some parts of the media can be summarised in a headline on 13 August in the *Evening Standard:*

"They're not all villains, but they know a man who is".

That was a comment on the people of south London. I rebut that simplistic suggestion.

I know the facts surrounding these cases and there is no common pattern. One or two murders appear to be gangland revenge killings; one appears to be a dispute between neighbours which got out of hand; one appears to involve an old grudge among youngsters which was converted into a wish for revenge when they got older; and one appears to involve a family member acting in defence of a parent under attack. There was no common theme. It is wrong to paint a picture of the community as though it were riddled with criminality and to suggest that everyone is involved.

On behalf of many of my constituents, I should like to say that the vast majority of the people are not villains; nor do they associate with villains. It is a slur for journalists to paint this part of London as one riddled with villains and, therefore, unsafe. The area is actually one of the safest in the centre of our capital, as the police would willingly testify. That reassurance must be given because, if it is not, people become afraid without justification. The fear of crime is as big a problem as crime itself. Fear of crime is often the difficulty that must be overcome. The Home Secretary and the hon. Member for Westminster, North said that many crimes are committed by young people on young people and that such crimes are often alcohol related. Elderly people and especially elderly women are perhaps the most vulnerable, but we must not suggest that they will be the most likely victims of attack.

I have some comments and questions about community relations, especially race relations. My most unpleasant moment in eight and a half years as a Member of Parliament occurred on the August bank holiday weekend this year. A march against racism and facism had been organised through Southwark and a counter-assembly had been organised by the British National party. I went to observe—not to take part—as did many others. It was an ugly event. The 700 police officers did a very good job and just managed to keep the two sides apart. There were 20 arrests. I have no doubt that allowing the BNP to behave as it did and, in particular, allowing it to use our national flag as a party political symbol, is in itself a provocation. I have asked the Home Secretary—I repeat that request across the Floor of the Chamber as there is a general election coming—to consider what we should do to ensure that racist and extremist elements in our society are not allowed to inflame and make worse [illegible]derlying community tension.

I thought that the original march was misguided as I could see trouble coming. Many people on the march against racism and facism now agree that it was a mistake to march in that place on that day. I hope that they will not do it again and I have made my feelings clear. However, there is no excuse for people who are marching lawfully to be attacked by bottles, bricks, stones or verbal abuse. I know of the Commissioner's concern about public order changes, but we must prevent such incidents from disrupting the community as happened on what was otherwise a beautiful, sunny bank holiday weekend.

Mr. Corbyn: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the behaviour of the BNP and other fascist organisations, but I urge caution if he is suggesting that those who march for racial harmony and against racist violence are in danger of provoking trouble. Anyone who wishes to march for racial harmony and against racist violence should be allowed to do so and should not be in fear of provoking a fascist attack.

Mr. Hughes: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but the issue is more complicated. He does not know the details.

Mr. Corbyn: But as a general point——

Mr. Hughes: I agree that the right to march should be protected, but people should reflect on the wisdom of choosing certain venues at certain times. The lesson learnt by the organisers was that they may not have made the right decision. That does not justify the fact that people fear being attacked if they march—the freedom to march is a right that we should all defend.

One of the most difficult problems is policing disputes between neighbours. I was interested in the Home Secretary's statement earlier this week about squatters. We have still not got right the way in which we deal in congested urban areas with nuisance and neighbour disputes. People's lack of remedy is something with which, as a general rule, we as legislators have not yet dealt adequately. In dealing with squatting and its implications the Home Secretary begins to touch on unlawful occupation, neighbour disputes, noise and nuisance and all of them should be considered together.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I share the hon. Gentleman's worry about neighbour disputes and, as a Member of Parliament, I am only too familiar with them. However, there are some very good conciliation schemes. I take the liberty of mentioning the scheme in Islington, although my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) is here. I opened its new premises a couple of weeks ago. It is a marvellous scheme which is much used and the idea is spreading across the country. Of course, resources are needed to expand it more quickly, but it represents a way of dealing early with disputes and of preventing the police or the criminal justice system from even getting involved.

Mr. Hughes: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. We have a mediation centre in Southwark. If people agree to go to it, it does a good job and such initiatives are worth supporting.

For many people in London, traffic is a nightmare. Last year a general police meeting was called by the Carter street police division and the main topic about which people wanted to talk was traffic, including parking and related issues. As yet, we have no legislation to deal with noise from cars. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 deals with noise in certain respects, but there is no legislation to deal with noise from cars, such as car radios. That gap must be remedied. I talked to police and environmental health officers about this subject only the other day.

I endorse the two specific points made by the right hon. Member for Sparkbrook. We must plan our arterial traffic movements to allow a time and place for vehicles to load and unload for their commercial activities without impeding the thoroughfare for those who are going along the roads. If that is not worked out properly, London traffic is slowed down enormously.

Box junctions are one helpful aspect of traffic organisation. When people breach the rules and stop in them, they drive me nearer to assaulting other people than anything else.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Croydon, North-West): Most uncharacteristic.

Mr. Hughes: I am glad that colleagues agree that that behaviour would be most uncharacteristic. If the police could do something about that offence, no matter who the person in charge is, we should all be greatly relieved.

I sense and observe a growing incidence of drug-related crime in the capital, after having seen it dealt with quite effectively in the second half of the 1980s. The people in question will know who they are when they read this speech. I went to see someone on a Saturday morning in broad daylight. I saw drug-related crime being practised out in the open in the middle of the estate in front of anybody who wanted to see it. It was not taking place in a stairwell or in a lift shaft. This happened on an estate not many yards from where I live.

The linked problem is alcohol-related crime. Far too many crimes are alcohol related. A constituent I knew, a 26-year-old talented final year student at the London College of Printing, was killed the other day by a motorist who has now been charged with an alcohol-related driving offence. The case is going through the courts. We need to deal with the alcohol problems which so often add to our criminal statistics and to the misery of our communities. Paul Witcher's family and girlfriend are more examples of just such tragic victims.

We need to continue to encourage the good work that is already being done. We should encourage citizenship and ensure that more visible community leaders are out and about in the community. We need better media coverage, stricter controls on the sale of alcohol, better planning, better lighting and, above all, better mechanisms for helping especially vulnerable people—women, the elderly and those who live alone. The agenda on policing is endless. The police do a very good job, but they and we cannot afford to be complacent for a moment.

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There is a lot of interest in this debate and speeches are taking 20 minutes on average. Unless they are reduced to about 10 minutes, I shall not be able to call all hon. Members who seek to speak.

12.3 pm

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Croydon, North-West): I am glad to have the opportunity to make a brief contribution in this important debate.

Mr. Tony Banks: That will do.

Mr. Malins: There is not much more to come. This is an important debate on policing in London and it is a pity that we have to have it on a Friday, because many colleagues who would like to be here cannot because of other commitments. It is an important subject, and I hope that at some stage we can spend more prime time on it.

The debate concerns policing in London, which is not quite the same as the level and the causes of crime: they are rather different subjects. We have had a bit of talk this morning about what causes crime and why crime levels are high. Does unemployment cause crime or is it bad housing, the way in which parents bring up their children, the television or indiscipline in schools? Over many years, I have come to the conclusion that I am not certain what causes crime. It could be some of those reasons, none of those reasons or all of them. I am equally convinced that many colleagues of all parties have a great deal to say on the issue, and can invent a great deal of integrity and ability in a discussion of what causes crime and how we can cure it.

I sometimes wish that we spent more time in the House talking about that. It is a problem that we all must face and grapple with. Crime is rising all over the place and if any of us knew the answers, he would be the first to stand up. We ought to spend more time pooling good ideas from both sides of the House. I do not think that either side has a monopoly of wisdom. There is an awful lot to be said for the approaches on both sides.

During the years in which I have represented my Croydon constituency, we have had a number of excellent and outstanding policemen. At the moment we have Chief

[Mr. Malins]

Superintendent George Crawford at South Norwood and Chief Superintendent Malcolm Hill at Croydon. They are both excellent policemen, who do a great deal to serve the community.

The police are trying to get closer to the community in Croydon, as elsewhere in London. They have developed close ties with the local communities over the years and there is an excellent police consultative committee, which has been in existence for about five years. It meets regularly. Local authority representatives, councillors, members of the police force, leaders of the ethnic groups, Churches and voluntary groups all get together on the consultative committee. It works on a basis of co-operation rather than confrontation, is a good forum for discussion and does much good work.

The police play a full part in the consultative committee, as they do in the general life of Croydon. There are many people in Croydon from ethnic minority backgrounds—their families may have originated in India, Pakistan or east Africa. People from those communities have settled in Croydon and are tremendous contributors to local life. I attend many of their functions—it may be Pakistani welfare day on a Sunday in March.

On such occasions, I always find the local police well represented, and they are there as friends. They talk to the leaders of the ethnic groups and have formed friendships and contacts over the past few years. My goodness, that stands them in good stead when the subject of policing in Croydon comes up. They get full marks for that approach and also for the policy of sector policing, which has already been mentioned today.

That is all part of the attempt to bring the police and public closer together. The South Norwood division has been divided into smaller and more manageable areas, and the chief superintendent has provided a group of officers for each of those areas, dedicated to serving the public and examining and dealing with local problems, we have a team of officers committed to a small geographical area. They get to know local people and problems, and are well motivated.

Sector B, which covers Norbury, is an example. In Norbury, they have sector consultative groups—those are another good thing, and there will be more elsewhere. The police have little local consultative groups in small pockets of London. That all builds up confidence. Community leaders get together to discuss problems and various local issues. By talking about problems, one can generally solve them in advance.

I was pleased that the people of Norbury recently said so loudly that they wanted to keep their police station, which is still there. In some ways, Norbury is a prosperous part of south London, although the northern part of Croydon is generally not so well off as the southern part. Burglary is the main crime. It always has been and probably always will be, along with car thefts. Most of the burglaries are opportunistic. They are often the result of people not taking care of their property and leaving their doors open. The same goes for car thefts and taking and driving away.

I am not saying that it is people's fault if crime is committed against them, but we could all do much more to keep our property safe. For example, about five years ago I had my car stolen from outside my house. I had left it open overnight, with the key in the lock, and was pretty embarrassed about it afterwards. I should not have done that.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary alluded to the possibility of developing a car that cannot be driven away even if it is broken into. I look forward to the day when we can develop such a vehicle and I am sure that technology will enable us to do so before too long. An old friend of mine in Croydon—a former councillor called Arthur Dwan—is a bit of an expert on car locking and has had much contact with the Home Office over the years. The Home Office is to be congratulated on pursuing the matter, but it is important to take any steps that we can to discourage car theft, by improved locking, through insurance and so on.

The same is true of property marking, and, in my constituency, property marking kits are often given away.

We also have excellent neighbourhood watch schemes in the Croydon area and there is no doubt that, where a good neighbourhood watch scheme is in place, crime figures are generally lower. We also have good victim support schemes.

I do not think that we live in a completely lawless society—although, because the local papers seem to carry nothing but reports of crime on their front and second and third pages, anyone reading them would probably think that we did. I do not think that things are as bad as they appear in the picture that is sometimes painted. We already know that the majority of offences are not offences of violence, and most violent offences—a huge percentage—take place in the home rather than outside it.

Much more crime is now recorded, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster, North (Sir J. Wheeler) remarked. The South Norwood police station has this year adopted a new policy on domestic violence and now regularly treats it as an arrestable offence, whereas in the past such incidents were referred to as "domestic issues" and sometimes not treated as crimes. Now, the police go in and they usually make an arrest. Is more crime being committed or is it merely that more crime is being noted as crime? I am never sure of the answer to that.

Two final matters worry the local police. In Croydon, as elsewhere in south London, we have a problem with so-called pay parties, where people create havoc overnight. There is much music and banging, terrible noise and great disturbance. Bad neighbours can also cause great noise and nuisance with music, banging, shouting and late-night parties. Many people complain to me about that and I have asked the police what they think about it.

It seems to me that, on occasion, the police think that they ought to be given a few extra powers to deal with the problem. At the moment, there is not much that they can do about it. They have to refer one to the environmental health department of the local council and, as we know, that may mean that nothing can be done for months. The police would like more powers to act on noisy parties and pay parties.

In Croydon, as elsewhere, people like to see policemen on the beat. They are reassured by the physical presence not only of a police station but of local officers. I warmly support sector policing, which I hope and believe will lead to a much stronger police presence on the streets. That greatly reassures people and that is what they want to see.

12.14 pm

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): In opening the debate, the Home Secretary gave his annual speech on policing in London. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) made a commitment that I am pleased to support—that Labour will introduce an elected police authority for London. The present arrangements are a sham and a farce. An authority that spends £1 billion a year is supposedly accountable to the Home Secretary, yet, given all his other duties, the right hon. Gentleman cannot possibly take charge of the detailed day-to-day running of the force and probably cannot even oversee its strategic objectives. Yet he is supposed to supply the element of accountability.

I am not complaining that it is difficult for London Members to meet members of the Metropolitan police: we all have an opportunity to meet the local police force in our constituencies. That is not the issue. The issue is the accountability of a major service. The Association of London Authorities has produced an interesting document and it has discussed its proposals with the police. I understand that many senior officers are in favour of a better framework in which to operate, in which there is accountability to the public on police performance and objectives.

The introduction of the ALA document by Derek Sawyer, the chairman of the ALA police authority, is interesting:

> "As a politician, I can say things that my officers, quite properly, restrain themselves from. Firstly, the argument—that an elected police authority for London is desirable, necessary and inevitable—has been won. The only remaining opponents of the idea are the sillier sections of the Conservative Party buttressed by the die-hard elements of the Home Office mandarinocracy. They see power and influence over policing objectives passing from their hands to those of the people who pay for the service and have increasingly high expectations from it and decreasing levels of confidence in it."

Those are wise words. I hope that the Home Secretary will consider more seriously his point about a structure for the police authority for London. If this Home Secretary remains Home Secretary, it is not acceptable that a 19th-century system will continue well into the 21st century. It is about time that it was reformed.

The debate turns on crime and crime statistics and the Home Secretary was more restrained today than his predecessors have been—and well he might be, when we consider the statistics. However, he seems to hanker for the days when all he could do was attack Labour politicians for somehow liking crime. People in my constituency, a poor inner-city urban area, suffer badly from high crime rates. Their homes are being broken into, their families are being attacked in the streets and their cars are being stolen. They suffer from high crime rates and they have no love for such crime rates.

It is too simple to say that the only way to solve high crime rates is through more repression and more police. Many other things must be done. The Home Secretary was right to refer to estate improvements and better lighting. That is very important. As I said earlier, that is fine as far as it has gone. However, many estates have experienced no improvements and in some cases half an estate has been rejuvenated while the rest remains in a very poor state.

We must also consider the high unemployment rates and the large number of young people who have very little to do, limited amounts of affordable entertainment and limited job opportunities. Those are serious problems and no one has a monopoly of wisdom when it comes to solving the problem of crime. However, I believe that it stems from a combination of living conditions, unemployment and the greed factor which, more than anything else, has been promoted by the Government.

However, we must also consider the design of housing estates and the environment in which people are expected to live. As a local authority planning committee chairman and a planning committee member for many years, I was always opposed to the construction of high-rise or deck-access buildings. I am not prepared to live in those buildings and I do not see why anyone else should, either. We should think more carefully about the kind of environment in which people are expected to grow up. Perhaps the Government can play a role when they are a little more relaxed in their approach to the cost yardstick measures.

Sexual attacks, rape and violence towards women are very serious in London. The figures are disturbingly high. I believe that there is still a serious level of under-reporting of rape and attacks on women, partly because victims do not want to report attacks and when they do report them, they do not feel that they can endure the ordeal of revealing the attacker's name—if the attacker's name is known to them—and all the problems of prosecution that are involved. The police must be given more encouragement to treat cases as sympathetically as possible, as they do in many cases, and they must also offer counselling as quickly as possible. Far too many women suffer the most appalling attacks on the streets, trains and tubes and simply do not report them. They feel scarred for life by the experience.

We must also consider not just police on the streets and street lighting but the staffing levels of stations, underground stations, staff on trains and single-person operated buses. All those matters contribute to a sense of danger and ill-being for women travelling alone at night. In this capital city, most women should not be afraid to go out alone at night and afraid to walk the streets at night. It simply should not be.

Likewise, we are dealing with race attacks and racially motivated attacks. The hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) spoke about the most disgusting aspect, which is the activities of the far right—the fascists in our society—for example, the British National party openly preaching racial supremacy, openly espousing racial bigotry and openly trying to sell its disgusting journal outside Brick lane market on a Sunday morning. Those people are poisoning our society. They promote race hatred, they promote evils and they promote and condone the violence that happens against black and Asian people.

Far too many Asian shopkeepers find great difficulty in getting insurance for their buildings because they are attacked so frequently. Far too many Asian families have experienced burning rags being put through their letter boxes. Indeed, far too many people have been killed as a result of that experience.

Once again, the figures show a higher level of reporting, but I fear that we are talking about the tip of the iceberg of a serious and large problem that mostly goes unreported. I hope that the police force will recognise the need straight away to ask the victim of an attack, "Do you think that it was racially motivated?" That is the basis on which it should be quoted as a racially motivated attack.

[Mr. Jeremy Corbyn]

A further matter of concern is the treatment of homosexual people by the police and the number of prosecutions that have been brought. Ninety-six years ago, Oscar Wilde, one of the greatest writers of this or the previous century, was prosecuted and imprisoned. It broke him in many ways. He felt unable to live in this country after that and finally died in Paris. He was prosecuted under a law that many at the time thought was antediluvian. Such laws are still on the statute book and can still be used.

Research by Peter Tatchell on what he terms judicial homophobia—I agree with him—based on the latest available Home Office official figures, showed that, in England and Wales during 1989, consenting homosexual relations between men over the age of 16 resulted in 3,500 prosecutions, 2,700 convictions, 380 cautions and 40 to 50 prison sentences. Among those victimised were 31 men aged 21 or over who were gaoled for consensual gay sex with other men aged 16 to 21. That is frankly quite abs[illegible] and ridiculous. The people who are prosecuted for alleg[illegible] gay offences are more likely to get longer sentences and more likely to get a gaol sentence than those found guilty of a sexual attack on a man or women. That is how bad the situation has become.

The Commissioner is well aware of the problem of attacks on gay men—that is the other side of the issue. A force directive has been issued on it. When London Labour Members of Parliament met the Home Secretary, we raised that very point. I am glad of the response that we received then and I am glad of the response that the Commissioner has given. However, the issue is not being responded to properly in many police stations in London. Hampstead police have a good record and have worked hard at trying to improve matters on Hampstead heath. However, local police often feel that it is not a high priority. The danger of gay men and lesbians being attacked on our streets is very great.

Mr. Tony Banks: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a misallocation of police resources to get involved in the entrapment of gay men? We are talking about victimless crimes. The idea that prosecution should take place is clearly wrong. Also, the police should not get themselves involved in trying to entrap those people.

Mr. Corbyn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a gross misuse of resources to use police time for entrapment in respect of matters that could be considered a crime under the terms of an outdated law, when far more serious matters of burglary and attacks on people walking around the streets at night should receive attention.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton): My hon. Friend is making some very good points. I have a copy of a report by Peter Tatchell which shows that, in 1989, the cost to the taxpayer of 3,500 such prosecutions was £12 million. The report also states that sentences for consenting homosexual relations with men aged between 16 and 21 are sometimes as long as those for rape and are often twice as long as the gaol terms given for unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl aged between 13 and 16. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is disgusting and that we have the worst laws in Europe? More homosexuals are being imprisoned now than when homosexuality was supposedly decriminalised in 1966. Is there not a strong case for the Home Office to act?

Mr. Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The Prime Minister recently met Sir Ian McKellen, on behalf of Stonewall, to talk about our laws relating to homosexuality. I hope that that meeting, which I very much welcome, will result in the repeal of some of those laws. We can only hope that that will happen.

I am conscious of the time, Madam Deputy Speaker, and will refer only briefly to several other matters. The statistical section of the Commissioner's report draws attention to the number of firearms and firearms certificates that have been issued. I find it disappointing that, once again, there has been an increase in the number of firearms certificates issued—from 825 to 864. The number of dealers' licences has increased from 268 to 270. Interestingly, the number of firearms that have been confiscated or surrendered to the police has increased from 1,440 to 2,762. I am concerned about the continuing year-on-year increase in the number of lawfully issued guns on the streets of London. I am also concerned about the number of sporting licences that have been issued. Clearly, guns can fall into the wrong hands. Many weapons end up being used in armed robberies or in armed attacks on people. The utmost caution should be taken when issuing firearms certificates in our capital city.

My constituency is very much part of inner London, and we have many problems relating to immigration and asylum law. I am disturbed by the amount of time and money that the police consume when carrying out Home Office immigration policies. It is a ridiculous misuse of police time and manpower. I am sure that the police will have made this point to the Home Secretary themselves, but they should not be seen as partly responsible for this country's immigration policy. That leads only to bad relations between the police and the local community and exacerbates any tension between them.

The report refers to some specific incidents. I am glad that, in some cases, the Home Secretary has been prepared to issue orders banning racist marches. A careful examination should be made of the circumstances in which that poor young man, Ronan Adams, died on the Thamesmead estate. He was the victim of an awful racist crime. I am glad that a prosecution and imprisonment have resulted, but the fact remains that that young man's life has been lost. His family and friends are grieving and that estate will be scarred for many years to come. There needs to be the deepest examination of the circumstances that allowed such racism to grow in that area and resulted in that young man losing his life.

Mr. Cohen: My hon. Friend is again making an important point. Is he aware that the Society of Black Lawyers met in July and wrote to the Home Secretary demanding action against racial attacks and supporting the enactment of a racial harassment Bill of the sort that I presented to the House in 1985?

Mr. Corbyn: Yes, I am well aware of that, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his efforts in that area. I hope that that Bill will be reintroduced and become law in the next Parliament, if not in this. My final point relates to deaths in police custody, which are referred to at the back of the Commissioner's report. Two occurred in my borough: one involved a death in Highbury magistrates court and the other, a death in Holloway police station, which is now the subject of an inquest. They are both serious matters. I think that there needs to be the closest examination of the guidance given to local police stations on how they should treat people while in custody, the ways in which some people have died and the access given to those providing medical advice and help. Frankly, many in the community have the greatest suspicion about the way in which those two people lost their lives.

The report relates to a large organisation which should, and must, be more accountable to the people of London, who want a safer city and the confidence to live safely in it. More accountability will lead to greater confidence and, one hopes, greater safety. There are many good elements in what the police do; they work extremely hard and, in many cases, try to be open and accessible to the poublic. It is now up to the Government to recognise the public's demand for an accountable police force and to respond to the initiatives by the Association of London Authorities, supported by the Labour party.

12.31 pm

Mr. Michael Shersby (Uxbridge): I declare my interest as parliamentary adviser to the Police Federation of England and Wales.

The report of the Commissioner of Police gives a useful overview of crime in the metropolis and gives considerable reassurance on the number of offences cleared up by the Metropolitan police. We are told that, in 1990, a record number of offences were cleared up. Last year, the total number of notifiable offences was 834,000, of which 141,700 were cleared up, against a background of an increase in crime of 10 per cent. A substantial proportion of the increase in crime involved auto crime.

I was glad to hear the Home Secretary refer to the discussions that have taken place with the Association of British Insurers. It has always seemed curious that, when a car window is broken and a minor article stolen from the vehicle, it is necessary to call in a police officer to obtain a crime number so that that number can be given to the insurance company. A better system would save a great deal of police time and I am glad that the Home Secretary is addressing that issue.

The range of offences that the police have to tackle in the metropolis in 1991 is substantial. Crimes include crimes against the person, sexual offences, street crime, auto crime and burglaries. Therefore, I was pleased to see the power of the Metropolitan police in action in my constituency about a week ago, when 18 people were arrested in a dawn swoop on no fewer than 39 homes. More than 150 officers with door-breaking equipment and special squads to foil savage dogs recovered thousands of pounds worth of stolen property—a semi-automatic pistol was also seized.

The operation was codenamed "Operation Switchback" and the raids were undertaken to combat the serious increase in burglaries and car theft that has taken place in Uxbridge and the surrounding districts in recent months. A clear message has gone out to the villains from the Metropolitan police: "Stay away from Uxbridge and the Uxbridge district." The message has been clearly received by those responsible for making people's lives a misery by taking their cars and breaking into their homes.

One element of the report should be uppermost in the minds of hon. Members: the characteristics of the offenders. We are told that the 10 to 20-year-old age group was responsible for 40 per cent.. of notifiable offences in 1990 for which arrests were made—a pretty shocking state of affairs. A majority of people arrested were under 21 years of age—for motor vehicle theft the figure was 70 per cent., for robbery it was 66 per cent. and for burglary it was 56 per cent. I want to highlight the way in which the courts are obliged to deal with those offenders as a result of the laws passed by us here in Parliament.

As the Bail Act 1976 now stands, the courts are almost always obliged to grant bail. It is virtually automatic. As a result, youngsters who steal and take away other people's cars to race them on the open road or on the estates of Oxford or Newcastle are arrested, charged and then bailed. So are the young teenagers who steal from cars, and those who have just spent the day or night robbing the homes of our constituents. I wonder how many hon. Members when they go to their constituency home this evening will find that they have had a visit from yet another burglar. Those criminals are free immediately after being bailed to resume their criminal activities until the police arrest them again and again. The police bring them before the courts again and again, and they are given bail again and again. They go on to commit numerous other criminal offences.

Urgent action is needed now in this Parliament to amend the Bail Act. We must stop this crazy cycle of crime which is so frustrating, not just to all our constituents, but to police officers who find themselves arresting the same people over and over again.

I am told that by the time the first charge is heard in court following bail—we all know that it can take a long time—it is common for the offender to ask for numerous other offences to be taken into consideration. What has the criminal to lose? Not much, it seems. I am told by the Metropolitan Police Federation that 18 per cent. of people granted bail and charged with offences have an average of 1·8 offences per person and that 12 per cent. of people granted bail are convicted of offences committed on bail at an average of 1·3 offences per person. Those statistics understate the problem, as they come from a rather limited database that relies only on detected, reportable crimes. The true rates of offending on bail are inevitably much higher.

I wonder whether the House realises that local crime rates could be dramatically reduced by the detention of just one highly active criminal. Surely the efforts of the police and the courts should be directed to that end. Will my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State give the House some assurance when he replies that the Government do not intend to permit a system to continue where youths on bail for 20 or more offences of burglary, violent theft or auto crime can easily go on with their criminal activities?

In some parts of London, much of the police's frustration about youths offending while on bail arises from cases in which youths are believed, often with good cause, to be committing further offences daily without effective sanction from the courts. Another problem is that, once a custodial sentence is eventually passed, it is almost standard practice for the outstanding matters to be left on file or withdrawn by the Crown prosecution service, thus perpetuating the impression that some young people can offend with impunity.

[Mr. Michael Shersby]

In the words of my old headmaster when he wrote in the margin of my report, this will not do. I tell my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State that it will not do. Action needs to be taken quickly.

There have been some encouraging developments in the provision of manpower for the Metropolitan police. In 1990, the recommendations of the "First Line Supervision" report were accepted, with the resulting provision of 29 new uniformed inspector posts and 177 new divisional sergeant posts. A further 108 new divisional sergeant posts will be provided in 1991-92. A further 181 new detective constable posts will be provided in the next two years, in addition to the 47 uniformed police officer posts for the policing of the docklands development. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) referred to docklands, and I am sure that those additional officers will be greatly welcomed.

In the past 29 years, there have been enormous changes in the way in which the police operate in London, and those changes are a matter of concern to the Police Federation. We have seen the introduction of computers and sophisticated communications systems, as well as many other changes in the make-up of the population of the metropolis. However, today the police are still operating on the same basis as they were when the Willink royal commission reported in 1962. The time has come when there should be another royal commission on the police, so that the role of the police officer in the 1990s and beyond is carefully considered. Recommendations could then be made to the House and to the Government about the way in which policing in the metropolis should proceed in the years to come.

My right hon. Friend has already set up a royal commission on the legal system, an act which all hon. Members will applaud. That royal commission is obviously necessary in the light of recent events. However, why not have a royal commission on the police? Why is it that there is still a reluctance to look carefully at the role of the police officer and how he will be expected to work with the community in the years to come?

The great improvements in reducing crime on London underground are good news. For the third successive year, crime has fallen and in those categories involving violence it is down by 23 per cent. on the 1989 figures. In addition, robbery has fallen by 12 per cent., assaults by 13 per cent., indecent assaults by 11 per cent. and sexual offences by 59 per cent. Those new figures should attract our congratulations to the British Transport police, supported by the Metropolitan police, and our congratulations should go to London Underground, which has achieved so much to make it safer to travel on the tube.

The new facilities that have been introduced by London Underground are extremely sophisticated. They include the new-style help point, from which information can be sought and assistance from the British Transport police quickly summoned. Those facilities are a good example of what can be done by good policing in conjunction with the use of modern technology. They have made my constituents, and I am sure those of many other hon. Members who represent London constituencies, feel much safer when travelling on London Underground.

I believe that policing in London is in good hands. The Metropolitan police have once again, done a first-class job against a difficult background. They deserve all our thanks, and they certainly have mine.

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Paul Dean): Order. Eight hon. Members are still hoping to speak before the winding-up speeches that are expected at about 2 o'clock. Most of those hon. Members have been in the Chamber for most of the debate, and I appeal to those who are called to be brief so that everyone who wants to make a contribution to this important debate will be able to do so.

12.43 pm

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North-West): If we all speak for between eight and 10 minutes we should all be able to get in. I shall do exactly that. I shall refer later to something that the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Shersby) mentioned, so perhaps he would care to stay and listen to my speech. I hope that that is not too much of an onerous task for the hon. Gentleman.

I must emphasise how much I, in common with my colleagues sitting up here in the Kop, welcomed what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) said about an elected police authority for London. His stout defence of such a proposition is reassuring. To be anchored in these uncertain days to such a substantial figure is reassuring to us.

It is interesting to note the way in which the idea of an elected police authority has come to be so acceptable to such a wide range of previously diverse opinion. According to opinion polls, it is extremely popular among the majority of Londoners and is supported by the three police associations, by senior officers at Scotland Yard and by the Liberal party. It is well set out in Labour's documentation and if the hon. Member for Westminster, North (Sir J. Wheeler) took the time to read it, he would appreciate how well it is set out.

Now, only the Conservative party is dragging its feet on the subject. But I suspect that in the end Tory Members, too, will be converted to the widespread opinion in favour of an elected police authority because it makes sense. One is reminded of the formula set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) when talking about new ideas. He said that first they were ignored, then considered to be mad, then denounced as dangerous and that later, after a pause, one could not find anybody who did not claim to have thought of them at the beginning. That is now the situation with the proposed elected police authority.

I was a member of the Greater London council when we first put the idea forward and I recall how it was denounced as a mad and dangerous scheme. The hon. Member for Westminster, North clearly misunderstands our proposal. There will not be separate elections for a police authority when the Labour Government have set up the new Greater London authority. The police responsibilities will be within that authority. The hon. Gentleman suggested that it would cost £3 million. If that were to be the cost, it would still be cheap at the price, because democracy always demands a certain price. After all, £3 million is about what the Ministry of Defence has been accused of losing through fraud in its own activities. I note in the defence reorganisation that the only regiment that has not been affected by the Government's proposals is the MOD's light-fingered brigade.

The gross caricatures that we have heard from the Government Benches about Labour's police authority proposals are absurd and should be dropped. There is no question of a Greater London police authority interfering in the day-to-day operations of the police force. It is about forging an accountable, responsive and genuine partnership between the police and the local communities of London.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) made it clear that Labour is the police-supporting party. We are the party of law and order because our constituents suffer the most from crime. I invite Conservative Members to come to my part of the east end of London and see how much we suffer from crime on the streets, car theft and burglary—all crimes that we fear are not being addressed in terms of police priorities and resources. My hon. Friend was right to say that one cannot look at the problem simply in terms of a lack of police resources, although we accept that there is such a lack. Crime is also associated with poverty, unemployment and the type of social deprivation that exists in many parts of London, mostly areas represented by Labour Members.

Recently I visited a number of publicans in the Stratford area—on business of course—and we talked about the problems of violence in that part of London on Saturday nights. There is a hell of a lot of violence associated with alcohol, football hooliganism and drugs. Publicans are leaving the Stratford area because they are not prepared to risk their lives and those of their staff, particularly on Saturday evenings, with the present level of crime.

Pensioners in the Stratford area will not come out of their homes in the tower blocks on a Saturday evening for a quiet drink because they cannot get one in a pub. They usually get a fight or are mugged on the way there or on the way home. This is clearly a matter of policing as well as of the other social problems that I mentioned. When we talk to the local police, they say, "We are sorry. Of course we understand the problems, but there is nothing that we can do about them because we simply do not have the resources." The Minister must consider the areas where there is so much crime against the person on the street and ensure that the resources that we desperately need in the east end and other areas are made available.

The police could make many savings in their operations. They do very well out of the Government and we want a more appropriate allocation of resources. The Metropolitan police's standard spending assessment is set by the Home Office to equal its revenue expenditure. Compared with local authorities, that is favourable treatment. The Met is therefore never deemed to be an overspender. The allowance made for inflation in the 1991-92 precept is higher than either the current rate or what the rate undoubtedly will be in the next financial year. We want the extra money that has been made available to the police in the generous assessment of inflation to be used to tackle the problems that I have described in Stratford and elsewhere in the east end.

We are worried that London's charge payers are still paying far too much for national police functions such as protecting the royal family, diplomats and senior politicians. Why should they have to foot so much of the bill for a national responsibility?

We have considered how the police staffing allocation is made. Concern has been expressed about the contradiction that is inherent in the allocation policy, particularly the penalisation of success. Chief Superintendent Hopkins of Holloway police reported to the Association of London Authorities' consultative group that a 10 per cent. reduction has been made in his officers following a year when crime was reduced by 10 per cent. It us absurd to penalise successful police stations. That must argue against the idea of ensuring that we reduce crime. What is the formula for the police staffing allocation and is the Minister prepared to revise it to prevent penalising a division and to offer police incentives in crime prevention?

My last point relates to one by the hon. Member for Uxbridge and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook. The port of London police and the force responsible for the port of Tilbury are to be sold to a private purchaser. The port of Tilbury is the only remaining part of what used to be the London docks. That is being done under section 22(1) of the Ports Act. The House did not understand—I do not know whether the Home Office understood the point—that that police force would be sold. Andrew Mackinlay, Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate for Thurrock, issued a press statement in which he expressed opposition to such a move. He made an important point that I should like the Minister to answer. If selling the port of London police sets a precedent, what will happen to other police forces that might be privatised were, God forbid and the electorate prevent, the Conservatives re-elected? For example, [redacted]ail is privatised, what will happen to the British Transport police? What will happen to divisions of the Met and country police forces that police the privatised BAA airports, the river division of the Metropolitan police, the Ministry of Defence police, the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority police or the Royal Parks constabulary? Will the Minister give a clear assurance that those forces will not be privatised without bringing measures before the House so that we can consider their implications, rather than their being slipped through in some other legislation without our being fully aware of what is going on?

Mr. Shersby: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Banks: I think not.

The people of London, especially those in the east end whom I represent, entirely support the police. We want to see more police responding to the needs of our local communities. In no circumstances will that happen under the Government, but I am sure that when my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook is Home Secretary I shall be able to get the responses and resources that we need and which I know a Labour Government will provide for London.

12.54 pm

Mr. Terry Dicks (Hayes and Harlington): The hon. Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks) is certainly an original thinker, but he has a short memory. He was part of the team on the Greater London council that helped to create the GLC police committee, which wanted to involve itself in almost every police activity, including selecting and appointing officers above a certain

[Mr. Terry Dicks]

grade. The GLC was politically motivated. If people such as the hon. Gentleman get their hands on the police in London, God help us all.

I listened carefully to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, much of which I agreed with. At the end, however, it became very much like a sociology lecture at a second-rate polytechnic. We heard about the police "reaching out" to the community, about every police officer in London going on a course and coming back to discuss it afterwards. Has not my right hon. Friend gone into a police station and found the shift numbers reduced because there were no staff to man areas properly? Before my right hon. Friend sends all the police officers on a course and brings them back for a chat, perhaps he should ensure that there are police available when a sergeant calls for a shift to go out on the streets. That is where people want to see the police.

We have heard before the shadow Home Secretary's views about crime. It is all down to deprivation—the poor little darlings do not have a job or any pay and they need our help. The right hon. Gentleman has forgotten that the poor little darlings of Newcastle burnt down youth facilities that they could have used and took away the livelihoods of many Asians and other ethnic people who were minding their own business and doing a good job. If we listened to the bleating and whimpering of the shadow Home Secretary, we would believe that no one was a criminal and that all those poor little darlings were hard done by. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that a local vicar, who did know a lot about what was happening, said that they were basically evil people. Only the shadow Home Secretary and Church leaders who know no better talk about deprivation, rather than face the facts of life.

We have heard much about how wonderful soft policing is, but there is too much consultation with so-called community leaders and not enough men on the beat. My kind of community policing does not involve sitting down with council members, local religious groups and so-called leaders but means getting men on the street. That would provide the best community policing. I make no bones about it—I have not attended, nor will I attend, a consultative committee meeting to which all these so-called representatives go. Such meetings are a complete waste of time. Senior officers would be better off organising bobbies on the beat or themselves going out on the street to find out what is going on. Sitting around in a council office for three hours during an evening discussing what one may or may not do and listening to someone saying what is right and wrong is not what the community wants the police to do.

The Metropolitan police and other police forces are too concerned about the impact on the community of operational decisions. The incidents in Oxford and Newcastle highlight that fact. I understand that, in Oxford, the police watched for months while the so-called joy riders raced about, but, because they were concerned with the wider aspects of maintaining law and order in the community, for a long time they did nothing.

In Newcastle, after several days in which many people were injured and many businesses could no longer operate, the chief constable said he was pleased that "no one was injured". Many of my constituents were delighted that the violence ended and that a few of the thugs had their heads cracked open and the businesses of decent people were saved. They did not feel proud that the thugs had managed to get away with their actions for three days before the chief constable did anything effective.

It is offensive for a man, his wife and kids to have to cross Hampstead heath. It is full of gays performing whatever they perform in public. Let me tell the House about the soft policing in the aptly named Jack Straw's Castle—of course, Jack Straw and his castle of education bear no relation to that place. The police turn a blind eye to the activities inside and outside that pub. It is about time that the police realised that, to the average decent heterosexual family, gay behaviour in public places or nearby is not acceptable.

It is about time that the police started to crack down and did not worry about people such as Peter Tatchell, who intends to write to all Members of Parliament saying, "If you do not support gay rights, I shall organise the gays in your constituency to vote against you." I do not know whether that flouts parliamentary privilege, but Mr. Tatchell can take his threats and, if we were in a different place, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would tell you where he can put them.

We hear a great deal about deprivation and the feelings of minorities, but the police are not social workers. It is not their job to worry about the cause of the problems—it is their job to administer the law as they see it. If they become social workers, who will perform the policing duties?

There should be a tougher line on demonstrations. The right to demonstrate carries with it a responsibility to behave reasonably. Too often, we hear about the right to demonstrate, but we never hear about the obligation that goes with it. I share the concern of the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), who has gone, about demonstrations and who should take part. I do not want the National Front to be allowed to demonstrate on the streets, and it is not allowed to do so, so why are the Irish Freedom Movement and the Troops Out movement allowed to do so? They are just as evil—in their support for the Irish Republican Army and what it stands for—as the National Front. The Commissioner must take a tougher line on who is allowed to demonstrate in the street. I believe—as, I think, do many Londoners—that the cost of such demonstrations should be met by the organisers, not by the public.

Let us consider the Notting Hill carnival—that wonderful event which the Commissioner allows while talking about a lack of resources and money. It cost nearly £4 million to police the latest carnival, where everyone was happy—except the person who was stabbed and died. Eleven thousand man hours were also allocated to the carnival. How can the Commissioner tell the Home Secretary that he wants more resources and more money when nearly £4 million and 11,000 man hours were allocated to police a carnival which is part of a foreign culture? That is a contradiction.

There is also a problem with football and other sporting events. In view of the crime rate, how can we continue to allocate police to cover such occasions in London? The best time to be a villain in London is about 3.15 pm on a Saturday afternoon. It is better still if there is also a demonstration at that time, because half the damned police force will be policing the football match and the other half will be at the demonstration or waiting to be called in. There will literally be nobody on the streets to protect innocent people going about their business.

It is time that we reconsidered sporting occasions. If fans cannot behave properly inside the ground, either the football club should take the responsibility or the police should say, "We are sorry, but we cannot police the event and, although you pay on occasions, you cannot hold the match." I am sick and tired of London not being policed in order to allow football louts—for example, those at West Ham—to bawl and shout and be involved in various criminal activities while decent people in the east end have no policemen on the streets. That is the dreadful position we now face.

On traffic, I share the concern of the shadow Home Secretary. Traffic in London is a major problem, but the one aspect that he did not mention was the blocking of taxi and bus lanes. We see that day after day outside the Palace. Coaches carrying tourists—who are essential to London—park two, three or four at a time, perhaps for an hour at a time. I raised the matter with the police, but the person to whom I spoke said that the police were in close contact with the Church authorities to ensure that tourists were not upset.

What the heck is going on? If coaches are blocking the bus lanes, they should be moved on, irrespective of whether the crowd that arrived in them is about to return. The person to whom I spoke said that the police were concerned to avoid friction, but it is not their job to worry about friction. If there is traffic chaos because coaches are parked in bus lanes, the coaches should be moved on.

Another aspect of the traffic problem is the police's attack on motorists, which is amazing. The latest development is unmarked cars and unmarked motor cycles. That could be a threat to a lady who is driving home alone late at night and is pulled over by an unmarked car or motor cycle. My advice to such a lady would be not to stop unless the police identified themselves. The police's attack on motorists is shocking, especially while they appear to be taking a less than kind approach to law and order.

My next topic is begging and vagrancy. We know what the do-gooders and bleeding hearts do about the homeless. We also know that for many, homelessness is self-inflicted because they need not have left their homes. We need some action against the begging in and around London, and especially in central London. It is an appalling and disgusting sight which must be stopped. Sleeping on the streets is also an offence under the Vagrancy Act 1935 and under other legislation.

When I raised the matter with the police, they said, "These are people who have nowhere else to go." I said, "It is not your job to worry about where they go. Your job is to make sure that streets and pavements are kept clear for people to utilise the place." If one goes along Victoria street and wants to use McDonald's or any other shop that is open in the evening, one must step around those people to get in. There is no need for them to be sleeping there and they should not be allowed to stay.

I have always been and still am a friend of the police, despite what I have said. I have family who were in the police and I have family who are still in the Metropolitan police. Occasionally, it does not hurt for a friend to stand up and say to the Commissioner, "You are doing things pretty well most of the time, but you are doing some things pretty badly on and off. It is about time that you took a different view." I hope that he listens to some of the things that I have said.

1.5 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Hammersmith): It is always a pleasure to follow a speaker from the liberal wing of the Conservative party. I think that he speaks for some Conservative Members who do not always speak out in quite the same way, which always saddens me.

It is some years since I have been able to speak on London policing and I welcome the opportunity, not least because there have been many changes. I will refer to the comments of the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Shersby) in a few minutes, if he will forgive me. Some of the changes are very welcome. When I used to talk at police colleges to both senior and junior officers, some of the views and attitudes I heard then were not in line with what was needed in modern policing. There have been significant changes in the training and recruitment of police officers, and I welcome them. That has been a positive step.

The positive changes are reflected in many respects by the change of attitude of police officers. As he said, the hon. Member for Uxbridge represents the Police Federation. I was sorry that he did not spend time developing the point that the Police Federation now supports an independent police complaints commission and a democratic policing authority for London. The hon. Gentleman is paid to do a job by the Police Federation. I make no complaints about that, because it is perfectly reasonable, but he is the only Conservative Member who is in a good position to explain to the Home Secretary and to other Conservative colleagues why the police have changed their view.

That is an important point. When the Home Secretary and other Conservative Members attack the Labour party for being irresponsible in suggesting that, we can stand it because it is part of the normal political fight. However, by definition the Home Secretary and Conservative Back-Bench Members are also attacking the police. They say that it is irresponsible to ask for those changes, yet the police are asking for them. Surely the hon. Gentleman in his position has a duty to express very clearly to Conservative Members that it is responsible to argue for an independent police complaints commission and for a properly elected accountable policing body.

Mr. Shersby *rose*——

Mr. Soley: I will give way, although I warn the hon. Gentleman that it will be at the expense of other Conservative Members, in view of what Madam Deputy Speaker said. However, in view of what I have said about his position, I must give way.

Mr. Shersby: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I do, of course, advise the Home Secretary of what the Police Federation thinks about many aspects of the policing of London. The hon. Gentleman need be in no doubt about that. If I had had longer, I would have dealt with the matters that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned. In deference to the Chair, I kept my remarks short.

Mr. Soley: I understand that. My point is that the hon. Gentleman is in a unique position to persuade his own party to understand the arguments. Only his party—no one else—holds the view that I have described and it tries to represent the opposition view, whether it comes from

[Mr. Soley]

the Labour party, from the police or from anyone else, as irresponsible. That is why the hon. Gentleman has an extra duty, and I urge him to carry it out in the future.

The Conservatives have always seen law and order as their card, but they approach the matter more circumspectly now. At the past three general elections, they were very foolish to promise us that they would cut crime. In Hammersmith, they put round a leaflet at the most recent election saying that they would cut crime. They did not; it increased dramatically. That is a foolish promise to make at any time, because the causes of crime are pretty complex.

The interesting point is that crime should have fallen for precisely the reasons that the hon. Member for Uxbridge gave. Most crime is committed by the 10 to 21-year-old group. In the late 1980s, that age group dropped as a proportion of the population. The baby boom had gone through. The general prediction that I and others made in the early 1980s was that there was an opportunity for a Government who cared about the social fabric and got the general background to crime right, to bring about a reduction in crime in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Conservative party must answer the question why it has not only failed to cut crime but has drastically increased it at a time when the main group that commits crime—teenagers—has declined in number.

The Conservatives in Hammersmith, who seem to be going through an extremist right-wing phase, were making promises. They believe that one can simply bash the people who commit crime, and blame teachers or parents—that is what the Home Secretary and his predecessors have done. That is foolish, because it is so superficial. It cannot be the answer to crime.

The one area in which the Home Secretary appears to have learnt something since taking on the job is that the causes of crime are linked to the social structure. He has learnt that from Home Office research. The social structure means factors such as unemployment, income, housing, and so on. The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. Dicks) may not like that, but it is true. It was also true in the 1930s. As I said earlier, the reason that that effect is worse now than it was in the 1930s is that communities are more fractured and splintered, with the result that families break down.

The argument about unemployment is often misunderstood, and several Conservative Members have misunderstood it yet again today. The argument is not, and never has been, that if one is unemployed, one is more likely to be a criminal. It is that parenting is a crucial factor in deciding whether someone offends. If stress is put on a family which is only just coping, the chances of that family breaking down are increased. Stress can come from unemployment, low income and bad housing conditions, and that can tip that family over into fracture and breakdown. The same goes for communities. When that happens, the crime rate goes up.

It is unusual for me to spring to the defence of the Church—it probably does not need my defence as much as I might need its from time to time—but the Church is right to say that social deprivation is a factor in causing crime. That explains why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks) said, the people Labour Members represent are those who suffer the most from crime. Crime is high in distressed areas, and fear of crime is greater there, too. The link between family breakdown and community breakdown is strong. A Government who do not believe in society, or that infrastructure of society needs supporting, are playing with fire.

Another simple example is that of homelessness. If the number of people sleeping rough on the streets increases dramatically, crime will increase. One way of keeping warm at night is to drink—one does not really get warmer, as alcohol lowers body temperature, but one feels warmer. A homeless person under the influence of drink and trying to get money for drink is more of a risk on the streets. Such a person is more at risk of sexual offences—of being picked up as a prostitute—and of drug abuse, which is another way of dealing with distress.

When the Home Secretary was a junior Minister at the time that the Greater London council was abolished, I told him that, as a result of the loss of the 4,000 GLC hostel beds, homelessness in London, and therefore crime, would increase. He told me then that I was wrong; I challenge him now to admit that I was right. My predictions were based not on a flight of fancy but on knowledge and a lot of research—not least, on research carried out by his own people at the Home Office. The Government should give that some attention, and start saying something about it.

One cannot play the law and order card by sticking to the silly idea that we shall simply get tough on crime and it will go away. The Government have been talking about getting tough on crime for years. All they have done is to increase the prison population without solving the problem. In reply to the hon. Member for Uxbridge, I say that we could build another 10 or 20 prisons to lock up all the people who are now let out on bail. Make no bones about it—we would need 10 or 20 more prisons. We could do that, but we will not solve the crime problem until we address the wider issues. In my experience—this takes me back to my earlier comments about training and recruitment—modern police officers are now much more aware of that fact and much more willing to understand the structure of society.

That is one reason why the police have moved towards the idea of greater local authority involvement. The only way to make a good crime prevention policy work is to ensure close co-operation between the police and local authorities. Concierge system in high-rise blocks, improved caretaker facilities on estates, improved street lighting and improved security for women in danger areas can be put in place only with the co-operation of the local council.

Those measures cannot be implemented in isolation and it is wrong to ask the police to do what the Government have consistently asked them to do—to screw the lid down and hold it down in the hope that the thing will not blow up. That is what the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington seems to think is their role, at any rate. In fact, it is the Government who have created the problems with which the police are trying to deal. That is the real issue.

Crime will always be a problem in any society, but, at a time when every other society that has experienced a fall in the number of people in the key age group has also experienced a fall in its crime rate, and given that all our history suggests that that is what should happen and that all the evidence of the Home Office and others supports that theory, the Government must explain how they have managed to deliver the highest crime rate in this country's history and to make Britain a much less safe place.

If the Government do not deal with the hard core of the homeless—those who used to be in the Bullring—they will create a group of youngsters who have nothing whatever to lose. Sadly, we are now witnessing, and will continue to witness, the New York style of crime. People will be stabbed, regardless of whether they are carrying any money, by people who are so utterly alienated from society that they have nothing to lose. That is what makes today's crime different: it is much more violent and vicious than the crime of 10 or 15 years ago. I am not saying that crime did not exist before—merely that it is worse than it was before, because of the Government's failure to address the problems of the infrastructure.

I want to repeat a suggestion that I have been making for a number of years, because I should like the Government to think about it again. Certain areas of the country, including London, have crime problems that are particularly difficult to crack. Often certain families or individuals in a particular area are responsible. There are also several problems in areas with a lot of racially motivated crime against vulnerable groups. We ought to think more imaginatively about the use of the police in such areas. We have already taken a step in the right direction by stationing officers there in the daytime, but I think that we should enhance the career structure, or perhaps provide an additional financial incentive, to encourage one or more police officers to live in problem areas, streets or blocks of flats for several years and so to become part of the community.

Research shows that, at present the chances of a police officer being present when a crime is committed are very low. We should put police officers in the community for a given period, giving them extra incentives in terms of proper pay or career structure. If we do that, the officers will be part of the community not only during the day or at evening meetings; they will live in the community and pick up the more subtle nuances of life that can be understood only by people living in the area.

I would not for a moment suggest that we need such schemes throughout the country, but there is a particular job to be done in areas with such problems and I urge the Government to consider my suggestion. The other options are to try to move families who are threatened—in other words, moving the victim, which is unfair—or to try to convict those who are committing racial or other offences, but such attempts often fail.

Britain has missed a wonderful opportunity to get its crime rate down. Instead, it has risen, and we shall not get it down again until we address the underlying social issues. We must have a police force that is seen to be in touch with the local community and I welcome the recent steps that have been taken to achieve that greater contact. We must have a police accountability system through a local authority and there must be an independent police complaints authority.

We have made much progress. If I had said—as I did —10 years ago, what I have just said, the police would have criticised me. They would now say a loud "Hear, hear" to my suggestions. That shows how far we have moved in the right direction. Let us get the structure right, because, at the end of the day, the fear of crime may be greater than its actuality—but the fear of crime is a dreadful thing to live with.

1.19 pm

Mr. James Arbuthnot (Wanstead and Woodford): It is a great pleasure to follow the eloquent speech of the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Mr. Soley). I agree entirely with his point about co-operation between the police and local authorities. That is necessary. However, he must remember that co-operation is a two-way street and over the years Labour local authorities have refused to co-operate with the police. He also said that the fear of crime is greater than crime itself. I agree with him. A recent survey showed that Britain is one of the more crime-free developed countries, but that the fear of crime here is one of the highest.

We must try to bring down crime rates and also the fear of crime. That is why I welcomed the police blitz of crime prevention in Gants Hill, some of which is in my constituency. Hundreds of police officers visited more than 600 homes advising people about locks, alarms, security and neighbourhood watch schemes. The blitz was very successful in reducing burglaries in the area and, just as importantly, it reassured the public and the fear of crime was reduced. That was an excellent initiative.

The police do a job which not many people would want and they do it with a competence and professionalism which should be a great source of pride in this country. I hope that no one feels that the criticism expressed in this debate in any way outweighs the praise for the police. There has been great praise for the Metropolitan police from hon. Members on both sides of the House today.

It used to be a sign of old age when policemen begin to look younger. I believe that there is a bit more to it than that. The police in London are a little too young. They are recruited too young and they retire too young and that affects the general level of maturity of London's police force. They retire when they still have a great deal to offer.

For various reasons, London's police force lacks the maturity of other forces outside London. The attraction of living outside London means that too many police officers, whose training and initial experience was provided by the excellent college in Hendon, are enticed away to quieter places. London suffers as a result. We must do more to redress the balance. We must offer a package that makes London more attractive so that officers who are trained here, stay here.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced last week that 1,000 police would be recruited from April 1992 and that is welcome. However, money must also be spent to support the work that the police do behind the scenes. All too often the police do a superb job of skilful detection or courageous arrest only to discover that their work is not supported in court. All too often the administrative details such as warning witnesses or legal technicalities such as taking counsel's advice and passing it to the responsible policemen are ignored or overlooked. That means that the case falls when it gets to court, which is obviously intensely frustrating for the police because their work has been wasted.

Police can be moved too frequently from geographical area to geographical area or from specialisation to specialisation, often without their having any say in the matter. A policeman who has been specialising in the detection of credit card fraud for two or three years has built up great expertise and experience. If he is moved, without any say on his part, to child abuse, for example, his experience can be wasted. Of course there is value in

[Mr. James Arbuthnot]

widening a policeman's experience, but there is also great value [illegible] using that experience. There is some scope for improvement in the police in London. Nobody would pretend otherwise.

Various suggestions have been made by the Opposition and I shall investigate them in some detail. The hon. Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks) suggested that Conservative Members should read the Labour party's documents about London. I have done so. For example, I have read "London Pride", which was last year's Labour tract on London. It mentioned the police twice. First, it said that

> "an overworked police force doesn't have enough time to investigate burglaries."

Secondly, it said that the answer to that problem is to bring back what I can only describe as a revamped Greater London council. Let us examine what the GLC did in relation to the police.

The GLC had no responsibility whatsoever for the police, yet it spent more than £2 million on grants to groups to produce propaganda against the police. At one stage, it even tried to give £53,000 to the Troops Out movement in Northern Ireland, but it was stopped by the right hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Foot), who felt that he might lose the Bermondsey by-election. He lost the Bermondsey by-election anyway. However, I should like to know how another GLC could help

> "an overworked police force . . . to investigate burglaries."

That problem was highlighted in the first part of "London Pride". So much for that document.

A second document was issued this year. It is entitled "London—A World Class Capital". I have read that as well. Policing barely gets a look in, except for an unedifying attempt to make people more afraid of crime than they are already. We are told that, on top of the restoration of the GLC,

> "successful policing depends on public co-operation. The London boroughs will be placed under a statutory duty to help prevent crime."

That would be a change, but how could the police in London hope for co-operation from London Labour boroughs? The Labour boroughs have been hostile to the police throughout the years. Lambeth council banned the police community consultative committee from meeting on any of its premises. Haringey council funded the payment of more than £3,000 in court fines. Lambeth council refused to allow police on to council premises without permission. Labour councils have always refused to join the police in their consultative procedures. It is no surprise that a recent Harris survey showed that only 8 per cent. of those questioned supported Labour's plans to make police authorities wholly elected. The police can look for no help from London Labour boroughs.

The Opposition have other proposals. They propose to allow secondary picketing and to restore the right to take sympathy action. Quite apart from the destruction that that would inflict on British industry, the damage that it would do to relations between British trade unions and the police and the confrontation that that would create would be devastating. We should be back to the time of Grunwick. We would find Labour Front-Bench Members back on the picket lines, yelling and screaming at the police as before.

There is more—there is the prevention of terrorism. In his 1990 report, the Commissioner said:

> "The urgent need to combat terrorism drew heavily upon our resources during 1990. A continuing Provisional IRA campaign demanded an intense response."

What do the Opposition promise in aid of the police? They promise to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act. That promise was supported in the Harris opinion poll by 3 per cent. of those questioned.

The Labour party appears to believe that there should be more police—the hon. Member for Newham, North-West said so—and with its policies, it would need them. In "Meet the Challenge, Make the Change", Labour stated:

> "We believe, as does every police authority in the country, that there should be more police and that they should be more visible."

The Labour party has also said:

> "We will also increase the number of police officers."

But would it? In practice, as we have heard, when the Labour party left office, it left the police force in London 4,500 below establishment.

The hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett) said that the Labour party may spend only on what she describes as a "priority", which includes a "top priority", a "high priority", a "first priority" and a mere "priority". There is no dispute about the fact that the one area that has never been described as any sort of priority in the Labour party's rhetoric is law and order and the police force. So, what does it all mean? I believe that it means that the Labour party will not be spending money on the police force and that, if we have a Labour Government, we can look forward to law and order being allowed to collapse due to lack of police morale and manpower—just as we found when Labour left office in 1979.

1.30 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton): In many respects, the speech of the hon. Member for Wanstead and Woodford (Mr. Arbuthnot) was outdated and shows a misunderstanding of the present position and of the fact that, although law and order has not totally collapsed in the face of soaring crime, it has certainly been given a severe blow.

I do not want to repeat what has already been said in several excellent speeches by my hon. Friends. However, I, too, welcome the commitment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley), the shadow Home Secretary, who is soon to be the Home Secretary, to an elected police authority for London. At the moment, the Home Secretary alone is accountable for the Metropolitan police, and this debate is our only chance to raise matters of policing in London with him.

I refer the right hon. Gentleman to what is happening at the top of the Met, because he is ultimately responsible for that. I draw his attention to the article in the *Observer* of 29 September, which was headlined

> "Met at war as corruption cases collapse"

and

> "'Bitter faction-fight' over reforms sparked claim of officer's Polly Peck links".

It refers to the suspension of Assistant Commissioner Wyn Jones, an investigation that has already cost more than £250,000 and which, among matters of a similar ilk, has concluded that he asked his driver to drive him to the opera in a staff car. The article states that the faction fight was between progressive reformers and the old school. How can the Home Secretary have let such a row get out of hand?

The article refers to some of the underlying aspects of the case, stating:

> "In Mr. Jones's absence, a series of reforming initiatives collapsed. Last year he organised a conference of more than 300 ethnic minority officers, which led to radical proposals for curbing internal racism and attracting more minority recruits—access courses, new grievance procedures and the posting of black recruits in groups of six, to end their isolation. None has been enacted.
>
> Among his last acts was to institute career breaks for women who wished to have children. In at least one of London's eight areas, any woman presently applying for such a break is automatically asked to resign on the orders of the Deputy Assistant Commissioner. In another, only those who have served at least 15 years have been considered for a break."

Such treatment of women is dreadful. I do not hold any brief for the assistant commissioner, but he wanted to introduce reforms which have now, allegedly, collapsed.

I should like the Home Secretary, who is the person accountable, to reintroduce those reforms into the Met now that this situation has been brought into the open. The right hon. Gentleman is in charge of the Met, and he has let it get into that state at the top. If such things had happened in a Labour local authority, the authority would have been ridiculed. It would have been hounded on the front pages of all the tabloids, but the Home Secretary has got away with it scot free—just like the prisoners from Brixton prison, for whose escape he is also accountable. When the Minister winds up, he should give us some answers to my questions about the position at the top of the Metropolitan police.

There is a great deal of jargon connected with law and order. "Order" is often used in politics as a means to crush dissent, but when the Government now use the word "law", it is with sand in their mouths as they have often been responsible for bad laws such as the poll tax. Their attempts to enforce that law have resulted in people being imprisoned and, in court time which could otherwise be used to deal with criminals, being used to hear cases involving the tax. The public, particularly Londoners, know that the Government's policies have brought record lawlessness, not law.

I am not happy with the use of "law and order" as jargon for electoral reasons. We should consider changing the approach so that we concentrate on crime prevention, catching criminals and police co-operation within the community. The Government have a poor record on crime prevention: they do not work properly with local authorities and they cut their money via poll tax and other revenue cuts so that they cannot implement crime prevention measures or back victim support schemes.

The briefing of the Association of London Authorities refers to crime prevention funding. It states:

> "Local authorities feel that their contributions are underfunded and misdirected by Government. They favour short-term projects with an emphasis on capital funding rather than long-term projects with revenue funding. The extra training costs have been neglected and our own training budgets exhausted. Additionally, we have no London wide picture that would allow us to borrow best practice ideas or measure dispersal effects.

The Government have not worked towards crime prevention with local authorities. As has been said, they are refusing to recognise social conditions such as unemployment, deprivation and the greed fostered in the early 1980s as causes of crime. We know that crime in London has soared up by 15 per cent. in the past year and risen to historically high levels. We still have a low clear-up rate when compared with the high rate of crime. When crimes are reported, the police must respond swiftly if they are to catch criminals.

The third element necessary to reduce crime is community policing. I acknowledge that there has been some improvement, such as the introduction of more women police officers. One of the success stories in the Metropolitan police involves women police officers working both with the community and against crime. However, much more needs to be done in relation to community policing and the police working with ethnic, minority, women's, youth and gay organisations in the community. When the police work with the public, they gain their confidence and crime is cleared up as the public begin to report more and more of their suspicions. I want the community approach to be more widely adopted.

I have asked questions on the police national computer every year since 1982. In 1983, the Policy Studies Institute conducted a report for the Metropolitan police called "Police and People in London". Page 29 states:

> "some young constables seem to carry out endless car checks".

In answer to my last question, I was told that the Metropolitan police carried out 4 million vehicle checks and 4 million name checks last year, which means that each driver in London is checked about once a year in the vehicle index and about once a year in the criminal index. If a Londoner drives a car, he or she can expect to be checked against those computer indexes about once every six months.

I question whether that is necessary. Clearly, some are needed to prevent crime and to protect the police and the community against violence, but are 8 million checks a year necessary? Some of them must be a waste of time and money, and an infringement of individual privacy. Support for the police is diminished when people feel that their privacy is infringed.

In increasing numbers of cases, the PNC is used casually by individual police officers for their own unauthorised purposes. There needs to be better control over that.

The position will get worse when PNC2 comes on stream. That machine is about 10 times more powerful and will be able to check every Londoner once a month or every fortnight if he or she drives to work. Alternatively, it can hold 10 times more information about each Londoner. Without proper control mechanisms, that could become counter productive.

I could raise all sorts of other matters about the police computer. The Data Protection Registrar should be more involved. On page 5 of his seventh annual report, he said:

> "Proposals for further development such as an integrated criminal intelligence system and the national criminal record system . . . allied with the increased computer power and flexibility provided by PNC, demands careful attention to the data protection requirements."

He is not saying that he is satisfied that those requirements are met. The clear implication is that he is not satisfied. He does not know whether those demands have been met, because he is being kept ignorant about PNC2. It is unsatisfactory that there is no proper data protection, especially as the Government propose increased vetting. For example, their scrutiny report on criminal records suggests that vetting would extend to spent offences and even to acquittals or decisions by the authorities to discontinue proceedings. That is a scandal and I have

[Mr. Harry Cohen]

tabled an early-day motion about it. Clearly, more account needs to be taken of data protection and the Data Protection Registrar needs to be fully involved.

I re-emphasise that the approach that is needed involves crime prevention, catching criminals and police co-operation with the community. Labour, along with the elected police authority for London, is committed to that.

1.47 pm

Mr. John Bowis (Battersea): A few weeks ago the hon. Member for Battersea was seen proceeding along Balham High road in the company of a police officer. He was then helped into a police van which went off, much to the amusement of some of his constituents. I was, in fact, going out with one of my home beat officers to see what the job involved, just as we and Opposition Members do in squad cars from time to time. It was a salutary and useful experience to see the sort of work that a home beat officer does and the welcome with which he is received by the community whom he serves under the new sector policing system.

We called on some victims of crime, not least some shopkeepers. One shopkeeper had recently been robbed. Somebody hopped into the shop, snatched money from the till and hopped out again. It emerged that the shopkeeper had not reported the crime because some weeks previously he had reported such a crime and the guilty party had not yet been found. The home beat officer had to explain that if every crime was reported, a pattern was built up which might enable the police to find the criminal.

That was a lesson to me about the need and usefulness of the home beat officer system. It also made me query police and crime statistics. The more crime statistics we have heard today, the more I have reached for the statistics book. For example, 50 per cent. of crime is supposed to be motor vehicle related. Yet although 90 per cent. of those who have their car stolen are likely to report it, only 30 per cent. of those who have something stolen from the car report it. That puts crime statistics into perspective.

The figures for different crimes go up and down year by year and one must question their reliability. I rely on the perception of the public and the police. It is more beneficial to visit one's local police station to see what is being achieved through different initiatives which are producing the results that we want. They are a credit to our police force, the many chief superintendents who have been mentioned today and Home Office Ministers who are working with the police and local authorities on many schemes in London to beat crime. That is what the public want.

Car crime is undoubtedly the big issue of the moment. In my constituency far too many cars are broken into and taken away or stuff taken from them. I welcome one initiative that the police have introduced, the "trap" car. If someone gets into one of those cars, the car doors lock and the horn goes off after 50 yds. If criminals realise that such cars are on the streets it could have a deterrent effect.

Vehicle manufacturers also have a responsibility to ensure that cars are safe against theft. I was alarmed when I got into my car and found that the key did not fit the ignition. I then realised that I had got into my car with someone else's keys. Mercifully I was unable to drive off, but someone could have got into my car and taken things away. That is wrong. The owners of cars also have a responsibility to look after their property.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) spoke about traffic offences and the police's responsibility for assisting traffic flow and moving cars that cause traffic jams. The right hon. Gentleman is right, but I wish that he would persuade the Labour party in Battersea of that; it is trying to stop initiatives such as red routes, which are designed to enable the police to keep traffic flowing. It is equally important, although the right hon. Gentleman did not mention this, that the police should be sensitive about the cars that they tow away. In the side streets of my constituency cars are often taken away in the early hours of the morning when they are obstructing nothing. They are taken simply because a team is patrolling the area with a tow-away vehicle. Often it is traffic wardens who authorise a tow away, and that decision gives the police a bad name in the community. Time should be spent removing vehicles from through routes and removing those that cause an obstruction and endanger the public.

The police should have extended powers regarding untaxed vehicles. There is nothing more aggravating for the law-abiding citizen than to see other people breaking the law and getting away with it. When such citizens see vehicle after vehicle untaxed they want some action. When those cars are parked on the public highway action can be taken, but when they are parked on estate roads—private roads—no such action can be taken. We should consider the definition of a public highway to overcome that problem.

Too many cyclists travel on the pavement and too many travel without lights. Every time I ask for the statistics on this matter I am told they are not readily available. That is not a surprise as such action is not perceived as a sufficiently important crime for people to take note of it. However, the public are aware of the problem and I am relying on their common sense and perception to convince the police that something should be done.

Great support has been given to the transport police of London and rightly so. The decrease in the amount of crime committed on the London underground supports the public perception that that form of transport is safer. That is good news and it has been brought about by the use of such things as cameras, mirrors, panic buttons and telephones for the public, as well as staffing in the right place at the right time. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary should pass on that good news to British Rail because too many of its stations in London are unmanned late at night. Those stations have no staff and no telephones, mirrors or video cameras to record any crime that may be committed. There have been too many assaults in those circumstances and the police and railway authorities should get together and act in the matter.

I am concerned about another transport-related crime, in that the offender was caught last night at Waterloo station. He was the escapee from Broadmoor. I congratulate those who caught him, but wonder how he got there. We had heard that the man, whom the public had been warned not to approach because he was potentially dangerous, had been on an outing, was browsing in a Guildford bookshop and escaped from his minder. If he was so dangerous that the public should not approach him, why was he browsing in a bookshop? I do not expect the Minister to reply to that today, but I hope that the case is being looked into to ensure that we do not endanger the police and public by allowing such people to be on the loose.

The problem of drugs is also traffic related these days. Whereas in my constituency one used to know where drugs were available—in certain launderettes and other fixed venues, sometimes flats—they now seem to be increasingly available from vehicles that are driven to places where somehow the young people know where to queue for them. The vehicles go in fast, dispense the drugs and are off. There is a different vehicle every time—for all that I know, they are stolen—causing an additional problem for the police.

We might make better use of cameras at such places. They are being used to good effect to counteract crime at some estates and inside tower blocks. If they were more in evidence to counteract drug-related crimes and perhaps prostitution in places such as Bedford hill, we might find that, in addition to recording evidence, cameras could help to deter people from taking the risk of committing a crime.

I appreciate that other hon. Members wish to take part in the debate, so I shall not deal with many other issues. I support what has been said in favour of action on noise, a key area where police need greater powers to tackle the megadecibels of all-night parties.

I agree with hon. Members who referred to the excessive mobility of good police officers in London. Too often, when we have just got used to a chief superintendent, he is moved to another area. Too often I am singing his praises only to find that he is leaving, and I must get to know the new chap so that I can sing the praises for what he hopes to achieve in the coming six months, before he, too, leaves. The sequence of appointments is too fast. It has been suggested that officers should not retire so early. Equally, they should not have to move on too quickly.

As I watched a recent episode of "Inspector Morse", it occurred to me that his successes were down to his knowledge of the Oxford area. Perhaps we could have a Morse code in London and encourage our chief superintendents and staff to stay longer in post. We might then achieve similar successes against crime as that gentleman has had.

1.53 pm

Mr. Hugo Summerson (Walthamstow): An advantage of speaking towards the end of a debate such as this is that one has had the opportunity of hearing the earlier speeches.

I was struck by the sheer hypocrisy of some Opposition Members in having the nerve to blame the Government for the present crime rates when some of those Members are, or have been, busy breaking the law by refusing to pay their community charge bills. Had they been busier obeying the law, not only would there be fewer people in the courts but authorities such as mine—the London borough of Waltham Forest, which has the sixth worst collection record in the country for the community charge—would not this year be imposing a surcharge of more than £50 on the decent law-abiding citizens of that borough.

The Sunday Times manifesto for London, dated 21 July 1991, contains several measures by which it feels that London could be improved. One of them says:

> "Face crime head-on. London is the city with the highest crime rate in the country, which places a huge burden on the Metropolitan police."

I shall return to that later. It continues:

> "Traffic congestion has also created the 'London driver', who ignores parking restrictions, red lights and box junctions, and exceeds speed limits wherever possible."

I agree with the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) about the selfish behaviour of those who block junctions. I should like to float the idea that what is needed is a series of mini-flyovers to take traffic over those junctions, rather like at the Hogarth roundabout.

I should like to take this opportunity to complain about state visits. From time to time, some tin-pot, crackpot, jacked-up dictator comes to this country and thinks that it is fun to swan around with the royal family in enormous limos, each of which seems to be about 100 yd long, disrupting traffic, frightening citizens and obstructing Members of Parliament. Once or twice on these occasions, I have had to show my pass to get into the House. If those people want to come here—I am perfectly happy for them to do so—why not do they hop into a helicopter at Heathrow and land in Buckingham palace gardens, thereby avoiding that disruption? There are several other headings in *The Sunday Times* report, but time does not permit me to set them out.

I want to mention the Control of Explosives Regulations 1991, which would give the police draconian powers. As I understand it, those powers would apply to someone who, perhaps on a walk in the country, picks up a shotgun cartridge and takes it home. He may leave it in his kitchen or use it as a paperweight on his desk. Under the regulations, the police can smash their way into his home at 3 am merely because they think that he may have a shotgun cartridge in his kitchen. I urge hon. Members to read early-day motion 1169, a prayer against the regulations.

I am a member of the British parliamentary lighting group—an excellent institution—and believe that if public lighting and street lighting were improved it would diminish the incidence of crime.

I am sorry that this is an unconnected series of bits—or perhaps bites—but I should also like to float the idea of a national demonstration centre. People should have the right to demonstrate, but in our crowded city they should not have the right to demonstrate at everyone else's expense. If they had a purpose-built facility, perhaps away from the centre of population they could demonstrate to their hearts content.

I wish to deal with one or two constituency matters and speak briefly on the subject of racial harassment, which is the most abominable, appalling and disgusting behaviour. The case of a constituent, Mr. N. Chaudry, who has suffered dreadful harassment, was brought to my attention. In January, his home was set alight in a petrol bomb attack. The family has received threatening letters. Mother and children have been threatened. The family have had their windows broken and their car is always being vandalised. I know that the police in my area are doing all that they can to fight racial harassment, and I applaud that. Indeed, I was pleased to see the chief superintendent present at the annual dinner of the racial equality council. That is good because, to some extent, it reassures the immigrant community. I am sure that that

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community would like to see the police make more effort, but my saying that [illegible] not intended as a criticism of their action.

The 1991 annual report of the Chingford and Walthamstow division sets out several initiatives: school safe; the against car theft, or ACT, scheme; neighbourhood watch; pub watch; work shadowing; and the drugs hotline. Because of those good initiatives, crime in the area seems to have fallen, against the tide. During 1990, the number of burglaries fell by nearly 6 per cent. and auto-crime by 8 per cent. That is an excellent record. Let us hope that crime levels fall not only in that area but across London.

2 pm

Mr. Patrick Ground (Feltham and Heston): In January 1989, Sir Peter Imbert, the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, wrote to all London Members of Parliament with a draft statement of the purpose of and values for the Metropolitan police. It included many fine statements, including the aim to

"uphold the law fairly and firmly".

I suggested that he should add the words, "but with common sense and good judgment". I was pleased that, when the final version of the statement was published, it emphasised the importance of the police doing everything and being seen to be doing everything with integrity, common sense and sound judgment.

The operation of the Metropolitan police in my constituency and in the London borough of Hounslow shows many encouraging signs. The police are taking the opportunities to keep in touch with local communities. The police consultative group works well. I do not agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. Dicks) about such groups. They help the police to ascertain the reaction of the local community to their policing style and to get an idea of what the public think is important. I am encouraged by the ability and attitude of some younger officers. The character and quality of the people who will lead the police force bode well for its future in London.

The difference between the Hounslow police and the territorial support group, which came into operation in Hounslow last Saturday, has struck the local community. I ask my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to look into the training and operation of that group in my constituency. Parents did not like the way in which their children—in some cases, girls of 12—were treated by the group. It is not acceptable to parents to have thoroughly bad language used in front of their children. Such behaviour stands at variance with the style of the Hounslow police. I hope that my right hon. Friend will consider whether the group should be more closely linked with and trained in its operating area.

I wish to discuss one matter which forms the background to the debate and is an important element in this and future debates. I greatly regret the absence of better statistics to serve as the background to the debate than the quarterly or annual figures on recorded crime. As an indication of the amount of crime or its rate of increase or decrease, the recorded crime figures are so valueless as not to be worth the paper on which they are written. They are in no true sense a reflection of the effectiveness of the Metropolitan police. The notes on the figures make it clear that they have no value for that purpose. Factors such as the increase in insurance, which causes more people to report thefts from houses and cars, have transformed some elements of the statistics and the increase in the number of people with telephones has made it much easier to report crime and has had a substantial effect on the figures of reported crime.

I am not sure why the Home Office continues to publish those figures on a quarterly basis. It has been suggested in the press that it is of some value with the Treasury in supporting requests for additional manpower, but I hope that the Treasury is made of sterner and more sophisticated stuff than that. I hope that the Home Secretary will consider whether it is sensible to spend money on continuing to publish the figures. I should be happy for them to be deposited in the Library of the House or in another library, but we have wasted far too much time and money on them.

If the Home Secretary believes that it is important to have better figures for the policing of London, I suggest that, as London is by far the largest police area in terms of population, he considers whether a form of British crime survey should be instituted for London. That, too, is not a perfect measure of crime, but it is much more accurate, reliable and helpful than the figures of recorded crime. For an area the size of London it would be worth considering. I ask the Home Secretary to consider seriously dropping the publishing of figures of recorded crime and to seek a better way of measuring crime in the capital.

2.6 pm

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I do not intend to discuss all the issues covered in the debate, which has been extremely useful. I have been struck by the quality of the contributions, particularly those of my hon. Friends, and especially by one aspect of those contributions. Anyone who has listened to the debate will be impressed by the level of pragmatism and by the ability to think without ideological blinkers shown by the Opposition and also reflected in the way in which Sir Peter Imbert produces his annual report. Anyone who has read his foreword to the report will be impressed.

We must bear in mind the background to the report. I do not say that the PLUS programme, which I shall talk about in detail, is not a marvellous innovation, but we must remember why the Metropolitan police and the excellent Commissioner produced that programme. It was produced as a reaction to a problem that he saw was becoming a crisis. We should not become too complacent about policing in London. What is happening under the leadership of Sir Peter Imbert is to be encouraged, applauded and welcomed, but it is the result of a crisis that most of us could see coming and which the Government had ignored, but which the Commissioner and his group of professional senior policemen had recognised. They knew that they had to act if there was not to be an even worse policing disaster in the capital.

The emphasis that the PLUS programme places on service-oriented organisations is first class. Partnership in the community is critical to the development of the Metropolitan police service. One of the most important aspects of the PLUS programme is sector policing, which puts the emphasis on community policing and on continuity of contact with teams of officers. Many hon.

Members have said how important that is. If PLUS and sector policing are to succeed, the Metropolitan police must have sufficient officers to perform such a vital front-line activity. All too often, officers are removed from the beat to cope with other contingencies, but it is on the streets that the critical relationship with the public is fostered.

At the Tory party conference the Home Secretary made much of his announcement of an additional 1,000 police officers, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley) spoke of that as well. The Home Secretary failed to mention that many police authorities will simply be unable to afford those officers, and that in many cases they will be phantom bobbies fighting a spectral battle against crime. None of the additional officers is destined for London.

I will concentrate my remarks on the rising levels of crime in London and on the need for a comprehensive crime prevention policy. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook said, it is a sign of the times that we say, "It is only 10 or 11 per cent. in London. There is only a 5 per cent. increase in recorded crimes of violence against the individual. There is only a 7 per cent. increase in violent crimes against women." It may be "only" that, but the figure is rising and it must be stopped.

Crime levels in London are rising by between 10 and 11 per cent. Burglary levels rose by 16 per cent. in 1990. By any normal standards, such an increase is appalling. It is a measurement of the Government's failure to control crime that the Met's increase is relatively small compared with the national average of 18 per cent. in the most recent quarterly figures.

It is also interesting—no one else has mentioned this in today's debate—to see the high crime figures for the home counties. We cannot cut the relationship between the home counties and the Met. In Kent, crime rose by 30·5 per cent., according to the latest figures. In Surrey, it rose by 20·6 per cent., in Sussex by 24·3 per cent. and in Essex by 23 per cent. I suspect that some of London's crime may have been exported as people offend in wealthy areas. The appalling increases are not the fault of the police; they reflect a malaise in society. We all accept that. Most of the enlightened speeches this morning, some of which were made by Conservative Members, have pointed out the complexity of getting to the roots of that malaise.

We cannot afford to ignore the link between the steep rises and the recession. Home Office research has clearly illustrated the link between crime and recession. Spiralling levels of property crime are entirely predictable when one considers the extent of the recession and especially its impact on young people.

Nothing that I have said condones offending. I simply seek to place much of the blame where it truly belongs—with the Government. I wonder why the Home Secretary this morning did not quote the words of Sir Peter Imbert and why he did not take him on in the way in which he has been known to take on the Archbishop of Canterbury. Sir Peter Imbert has been far more clear cut and positive in expressing the relationship between deprivation and crime than the Archbishop of Canterbury has ever been.

I quote from the foreword to the report. Sir Peter Imbert says:

> "But what of conditions in our inner-cities? Have the factors which were said to 'underlay' the disorders been addressed? Housing, education and employment were identified as key areas in 1981. It is not for me to evaluate the changes that have taken place since then. However, the crime map fits all too closely over the map of disadvantage."

Sir Peter Imbert then drives the point hard home. If the Home Secretary is doing the job of representing the democratic part of the relationship between the Commissioner and the police, he is negligent not to have commented on the views of Sir Peter Imbert, especially in view of the Home Secretary's other comments about the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Government are also to blame for the low priority given to crime prevention. The police put an enormous amount of work into crime prevention. They support watch schemes and advise on crime prevention measures, and local authorities are keen to work in that area. In London, we have seen outstanding examples of local authority work. Once again, the Home Secretary searches around for a Labour authority to castigate. When will he pick out the authorities, whether Conservative, Liberal Democrat or Labour, that are doing so much excellent work in crime prevention? Of the Labour authorities, Islington, Hammersmith and Fulham and Southwark all spring to mind instantly because they are doing positive work.

We have argued for years that far greater priority should be given to crime prevention and that the role of the local authority must be recognised. All our arguments have been reinforced by the Morgan report. Yesterday I attended the annual conference of Crime Concern. It was an excellent meeting and there were some good contributions. I hope that the Home Secretary will study the remarks of his Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mr. Norris), who is not here at present. He made some remarks about the Morgan report being welcomed by the Government. That is not the impression that the Opposition have had. That report is to be buried because its central recommendations include giving local authorities a statutory duty to play a role in and to fund crime prevention. Eight recommendations of the Morgan report are eight fundamental criticisms of the Government's attitude to a locally based crime prevention strategy. Too often local authorities are left out in the cold.

Sir Peter Imbert's report hammers home what happens if the police do not have the trust and confidence of the local authority and a partnership that goes with the local authority into the community. If that partnership is not democratically led it will not work. There has been a fundamental change among those who police the capital city—and the rest of the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Newham, North-East (Mr. Leighton) mentioned a book by Robert Reiner which reveals that most chief constables would welcome an elected police authority for London. That is a big change among the police and it has taken place not only at the top among commissioners and senior officers. When I visit local subdivisions in the Metropolitan area I hear the view strongly expressed everywhere that the police want that democratic role for London. They see nothing but good coming from it.

The Opposition say to the Government, "Throw off your ideological blinkers and realise what most pragmatic, fair-minded people are saying both inside and outside the police." That relationship would be right and would make the crime prevention strategy in the capital and in the rest of the country work far better.

[Mr. Barry Sheerman]

There is another problem that troubles all of us. When we form the Government next year, we shall have to tackle it as seriously as any Government ever have. Young people today are in a condition in which they have never been before. A proportion of our young people are more under-privileged and more exploited—certainly more commercially exploited—than any previous generation. If the allowance for those on the youth training scheme had been held constant in real terms since 1978, when it was introduced at £28·50, it would now have been uprated to £52·50. Yet the same sort of young people—the 17 and 18-year-olds—are receiving £27 to £30 a week. Furthermore, 17 and 18-year-olds cannot draw benefit. If one under-privileged group of young people is exploited, although they will not all become criminals, it is obvious that the statistics will show rising crime among young people. The challenge for all of us is what we do with young people, how we encourage them and give them hope.

In modern Tory Britain one cannot walk safely in most of our town and city centres on a Friday or a Saturday night because of under-age drinking. That fact is undisputed by most Members of Parliament. Those who walk through my town of Huddersfield—or Halifax and other towns in West Yorkshire, or, indeed, most central urban areas of London—know that those areas are dangerous places on Friday and Saturday nights, because of the misuse of alcohol.

Young people are exploited as never before. The challenge that I have described today is an important one for us to grasp. It is too important a problem for political parties to ignore, and we must recognise that it will get worse and worse.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Mr. Soley) referred to the unique opportunity afforded to us by the demographic downturn—the fall in the number of births. The fact that there were fewer teenagers should have meant a decline in youth crime, but that has not happened. Youth crime has increased and the challenge that we face is to grasp the problems and turn them into opportunities. Through real policies of youth opportunity and youth crime prevention, we must work positively towards a partnership that will make our country work for young people. That is the way to fight crime in the metropolis, that is the way to a positive policy, and that is the path that the Labour party in government will take next year.

2.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Peter Lloyd): As I find is the case each year, this has been a full, interesting and varied debate and a great many serious issues have been raised. As I also find each year, I am heavily pushed up against the clock. However, I am glad that all those hon. Members on both sides of the House who sought to speak have managed to get into the debate. I shall try to respond to some of the points and to answer in the time that I have left some of the questions that have been asked—as far as my handwriting, which has become progressively worse, will allow.

I am glad that both Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen congratulated the Metropolitan police and agree with us that the Met is making good progress with the right policing strategy. I am only sorry that, in one part of his peroration, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) tried to suggest that all our towns and cities up and down the country are rendered no-go areas on Friday and Saturday nights by young people. There are problems, but to exaggerate them in that manner does not help to solve them.

Let me deal with the specific questions of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Sparkbrook (Mr. Hattersley), who asked me first about a Home Office study that assessed the extent to which improved street lighting helped to reduce crime. A recent study by the crime prevention unit suggests that improved street lighting cannot be shown directly to reduce crime, although that does not, of course, mean that it is not a useful aspect of a more general programme of crime reduction, as has been shown to be the case in the refurbishment of certain estates in London where crime figures have been particularly high. Most particularly, however, improved street lighting helps to give the public confidence. As anyone who studies these matters knows, although the reality of crime is a huge problem, for many more people the fear of crime is a greater problem.

The right hon. Member for Sparkbrook also asked me to comment on the Morgan report on crime prevention, published at the end of August. We are consulting the Association of Chief Police Officers, local authorities and other organisations about its recommendations and, in the light of their responses, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will consider whether changes are needed and, if so, what changes are needed to structure, organisation and funding to make the delivery of local crime prevention activity more effective.

The right hon. Member for Sparkbrook wondered whether the Met would have enough officers to make a continuing success of the sector policing policy, which the right hon. Gentleman, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and, I believe, all the hon. Members who have spoken—except, perhaps, one—consider to be absolutely essential. The Commissioner believes that sector policing can be achieved within existing resources and I am sure that the the right hon. Member for Sparkbrook will not forget that the Met now has 6,000 more officers than it did in 1979. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary discusses the Met's manpower needs each year as part of the public expenditure round. It is not normal practice to breach the confidentiality of those discussions, but it is no secret that the emphasis of the Commissioner's strategy is to increase operational strength through civilianisation and through this process we shall be making resources available for 1,000 new operational officers over the next three years.

Mr. Soley: In London?

Mr. Lloyd: Yes, in London, over the next three years.

The deployment of officers is a matter for the Commissioner. He uses the work load related formula. The right hon. Member for Sparkbrook wondered whether in areas like area No. 1, where the police have had a particular success in reducing crime, that would automatically lead to a loss of officers. Of course, the Commissioner takes account of the crime rate with regard to the deployment of officers, but there are, quite rightly, other factors. He is considering his practice in that sphere and will, if necessary, revise his formula. Although a number of policemen on the beat have been taken from administrative duties, that resulted because the Commissioner preferred it. As he and hon. Members know, money goes much further that way. We have undertaken to provide the Met with 100 extra police posts from 1 April 1992.

The right hon. Member for Sparkbrook wanted to know how many prisoners there are in police cells in London. The figure is 200 and they cost about £325 a night. He was right to say that the refurbishment and improvements of Brixton are being delayed until January to allow the extra places being provided by the brand new prison of Belmarsh to come on stream. The far-sighted provision of that prison will make it possible to deal with the problem.

There seems to be some confusion about the policing of London docks. Forty or 50 members of the Port of London police are not part of the Met, but are the responsibility of my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Transport. He has announced that as a consequence of the privatisation of Tilbury docks, the status of those officers will change. They will be in the same position as their equivalents in places like Felixstowe, where I believe that there is no suggestion but that they operate with great efficiency and effectiveness.

There are no general plans to change the status of so-called private police forces to which the hon. Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks) referred, such as the Ministry of Defence police. If their status is to be changed, it would require legislation and the House would have an opportunity to debate the matter. However, there are no plans along those lines.

The policing of docklands is another matter. Docklands has the same policing needs as other parts of London and the Commissioner deploys his strength as he judges best. Extra policemen have been deployed to docklands and the new police station at Canary wharf will be opened by the end of the year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Shersby) raised an important matter and spoke with his usual thoughtful concern. He asked particularly about bail and the reported increase in offences committed by people on bail. It is not known to what extent reoffending by people remanded on bail has contributed to the increase in recorded crime. Home Office researchers are gathering information about that and are analysing recent research studies by police forces. The work is due to be completed by the end of this month. We shall then consider urgently what further steps may need to be taken. Discussions have already taken place with senior police officers and further discussions are expected when all the information has been brought together. It is an important point of widespread concern and I am glad that my hon. Friend raised it.

Government policies are already directed at reducing the likelihood that people on bail will commit crimes, by reducing the time spent on bail, by minimising court delays, by bail information schemes, which allow magistrates better to identify defendants who can be released on bail, and by increasing the provision of places in bail hostels in which people on bail can be monitored to minimise the risk of further offending without the need to remand them to prison. The Home Office has a programme to provide 1,200 additional bail places and improve bail hostels by April 1994. Five hundred of them have already been made available.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed without Question put.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Earlier, the hon. Member for Southwark and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) referred to a letter from the European Commission to the British Government concerning a number of transport and environmentally related issues. The matter is obviously of great importance in protecting the environment and improving public transport in this country. As the Minister for Public Transport is present, preparing to answer the Adjournment debate, may I ask whether you have had a request from the Government to make a statement on this extremely important matter? It affects the M3, the channel tunnel route, King's Cross, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Mr. Smith), and the future of Oxleas wood. It also affects other serious issues such as the M11 link. I hope that the Government will at least come up with a statement now to allay public concern.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Perhaps, through you, we could elicit from the Minister either an indication that he will make a statement now or, more likely, given that we have had no notice, that we may have a statement before Parliament is prorogued. Obviously, the matter is urgent because it is a time-limited issue, and a statement to clear uncertainty before next Tuesday would be very welcome if the Minister would indicate assent.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The matter affects my constituency because of the M11 link. I add my voice to the request for a statement either today or early next week. Perhaps the relevant Minister could also be present, because many such schemes have fallen foul of the EC because of their poor environmental standards.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Paul Dean): I have had no notice about a statement, but I am sure that what hon. Members have said has been noted by Government Front-Bench Members.

SEVERN BRIDGES BILL

Ordered,

That so much of the Lords Message of 15th October as relates to the Severn Bridges Bill be now considered;

Ordered,

That further proceedings on the Severn Bridges Bill shall be suspended until the next Session of Parliament;

Ordered,

That if a Bill is presented to this House in the next Session in the same terms as the Severn Bridges Bill at the last stage of its proceeding in this House in this Session—

(a) the Bill shall be deemed to have been read the first, second and third time; and

(b) the Standing Orders and practice of the House applicable to the Bill, so far as complied with in relation to the Bill in this Session, shall be deemed to have been complied with in relation to the Bill in the next Session;

Ordered,

That these Orders be Standing Orders of the House.—*[Mr. David Davis.]*

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Ordered,

That European Community Documents Nos. 5896/91 and 4051/91, relating to financial and technical assistance for developing countries, shall not stand referred to European Standing Committee B.—*[Mr. David Davis.]*

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 22nd October, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 9 (Sittings of the House), Mr. Speaker shall, not more than half an hour after a Motion has been made by a Minister of the Crown for the adjournment of the House, suspend the sitting until such time as a Message is received from the Lords Commissioners.—*[Mr. David Davis.]*

Rail Services (Kent)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. David Davis.]*

2.32 pm

Mr. Roger Moate (Faversham): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for having specially returned from his other ministerial duties to respond to this Adjournment debate on Kent commuter rail services. He is carrying on the tradition that he established of being immensely concerned about the quality of our rail services in Kent. We are deeply grateful to him for his efforts on our behalf. We should be even more grateful for even more efforts, and that is the point of the debate. However, his efforts are genuinely meant and we are appreciative.

It was my good fortune to obtain the debate, and I naturally wish to concentrate on the issues facing my constituents and the north Kent and coast services. The quality and cost of commuting from Kent to our capital city is a vital concern to every Kent hon. Member and to thousands of our constituents.

I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Thanet, North (Mr. Gale) will speak in this short debate and will dwell on many of the issues with which we are jointly concerned. Although he and I sometimes have slight differences of opinion about the frequency of trains stopping at Sittingbourne or Faversham on the way to Thanet, we share the same concerns about improving services for long-distance commuters. Thousands of our constituents spend a large portion of their lives on trains, and the quality of their lives is affected quite positively by the punctuality, dependability and comfort of train services. Indeed, often their livelihoods are affected by their ability to get to work on time after a sensible journey.

As further evidence of the widespread concern about this matter, my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Wolfson) wished to contribute, but, because short Adjournment debates do not allow sufficient time for many hon. Members to speak, he has asked me to put his views on record. He said:

> "The Oxted, Edenbridge, Uckfield line is notorious among all who use it for unreliability, lateness and frequently cancelled trains. This is despite continual representations to British Rail by their passengers and by their Members of Parliament. In this case, British Rail management are failing to deliver on the very targets that they have set themselves."

There is continued frustration among passengers who face late or cancelled trains. Generally speaking, I do not wish to deliver a major onslaught against British Rail, its management or staff. They have delivered important improvements in productivity and have generally performed their task well in difficult circumstances in recent years. However, it is important to understand the frustrations that face the travelling public even in these autumn months, but the winter months, which give rise to other difficulties, are the time when frustrations mount, complaints are made and British Rail is judged by its customers. One feels ominously that the worst is yet to come if we have a difficult winter. I repeat that I am not here to launch a wholesale attack on British Rail, although, of course, there are shortcomings and failures. My concern is to try to help British Rail through the difficulties that it and my constituents face.

Like many others, I was alarmed in August by British Rail's press announcement that we should have to face some cuts in off-peak services and some deferred capital expenditure because of a shortfall in revenue due to the recession. I understand that the deferment included some slippage in the planned programme for new Networker express trains. That announcement was bad enough in itself and prompted today's debate, but the latest announcement of fare increases has caused even more anger and has rubbed salt in the wound in no uncertain way. We feel strongly that we are now faced with higher fares without any promise of the higher quality service that we were expecting and without any assurance of a continuous investment programme ahead. On top of that, the beginning of the channel tunnel rail service in 1993 as scheduled or, allowing for slippage, at the very latest in 1994, will impose tremendous strains on the existing capacity of our Kent main line. That is probably only two or a maximum of three years ahead.

This is a critical time for our railway systems. We must make some fundamental long-term decisions, but just at the moment when we should be making those long-term decisions, we seem to be slipping back as a result of short-term considerations arising from a drop in revenue due to the recession.

As I see it, the main issue facing our Kent coast service is the new Networker express train, the Networker 471. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will tell us about the £700 million—an enormous sum—that is to be spent on the renewal of the Kent link services, including the Networker 465 trains. I plead with him, however, to make it clear to everyone that the Networker express services, about which I and others are talking, are totally different from the north Kent Networker 465 trains. The confusion of name sometimes makes people feel that we on the Kent coast already have our new trains. That is not the case. Not only have our new trains not yet been ordered, but there is no prospect of that. At this stage, we have no guarantee about their order date, yet those trains are vital to the future of the Kent longer distance services.

Earlier this year, my hon. Friend the Minister and many hon. Members representing Kent constituencies saw a mock-up of the proposed new trains. We all hoped then that the new trains would have been ordered by now. Even so, it would have still been a couple of years before the first of those new trains started to come off the production lines. The order has not been placed and I should like to hear from my hon. Friend the Minister today or in the very near future that those trains will rapidly be ordered, produced and delivered.

The present old rolling stock is more than 30 years old and urgently needs replacing. The new stock is not only more comfortable, safer and faster but, crucially, will increase capacity on the network by almost 50 per cent. The present trains have a maximum capacity of 666 passengers, the new ones have a capacity of 900 passengers. Creating a 50 per cent. increase in capacity is almost like building a new railway. If we do not order new trains now, we shall soon hit a major crisis in capacity.

This year there has been a fall in passenger traffic due to the recession, with about a 6 per cent. drop in peak hour demand, but the signs are that growth will resume in the coming year and we could soon face problems of serious overcrowding. The channel tunnel, which is due to open in 1993 or 1994 will generate new demands on the system. It is expected that the new international passenger trains will reach their capacity constraints at peak times in the first year of the channel tunnel's operation. Quite simply, unless the new Networker express trains with their extra capacity are introduced, there will be serious trouble by about 1994. Even with the new trains, British Rail expects that saturation level will be reached by 1998. That illustrates the importance of ensuring that there is no serious slippage on the new high-speed rail links. At the very least, the new Networker trains must be put in service as a matter of urgency.

British Rail states that, following the August cuts, the class 471 scheme is now being planned for 1995. I believe that with some effort and initiative those new trains could start coming off the production line in 1993. British Rail has asked me to stress that all safety schemes will be totally protected from any of the cuts, and it is right to put that on record. Other Kent Members and I do not want to see further essential investment squeezed out by short-term problems.

The issue of fares is of serious concern to my constituents. I welcome the apparent intervention of the Prime Minister and the philosophy of the citizens charter. If that means that passengers should pay higher fares only for better services and trains, that will be welcomed by the travelling public. We on the north Kent lines face fare increases of 8 per cent.—twice the level of inflation—without better services and without the promise of the new trains that we so badly need. I do not understand why fares on our north Kent and Kent coast lines should not have been held back to the inflation level until a new investment programme was promised.

I recognise the financial difficulties facing Network SouthEast at present, but we should give more support to British Rail to sustain the investment programme through the recession. I am proud that the Government are investing record sums in our rail system which are far higher than the amounts invested by Labour Governments. I welcome the £350 million which is being invested in Network SouthEast this year, but it is clearly not enough and we must find new sources of finance for our railway system. That is the great challenge ahead of us.

In the meantime, my message to the Government is this. First, this year we should increase the public service obligation grant to help British Rail through the recession. Secondly, British Rail should modify its fare increases on unmodernised lines. Thirdly, we should order the new Networker express trains now. I hope that today, or very soon, my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to offer some help to the hard-pressed commuters of Kent.

2.43 pm

Mr. Roger Gale (Thanet, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham (Mr. Moate) on securing this debate on an issue of crucial importance to all those who live near to and are compelled to use the north Kent line. I thank him and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, who has—as my hon. Friend said—been extremely supportive, for allowing me to contribute briefly to the debate. I endorse almost every word of the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham. The only reason why I say "almost" is that I am not so charitable towards British Rail management as he customarily is.

This morning I travelled by train. As I got out at Victoria station, a constituent came up to me and said that he was pleased to see his Member of Parliament suffering the same privations as his constituents. He went on to say that as the train was on time this morning, British Rail must have known that I was travelling. The train was

[Mr. Roger Gale]

indeed on time and the interior was clean, but the exterior was filthy. The staff were friendly and extremely helpful. I should like to put that on the record, but is it not extraordinary that one comments on it because it is the exception rather than the rule?

My hon. Friend the Minister took the trouble to come and see for himself the miseries that commuters on the north Kent line suffer, so he will understand only too well why earlier this week my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), who does not characteristically admit to being second in anything, acknowledged that the Southend line was the second worst line in Network SouthEast. The north Kent line is undoubtedly the worst. For the privilege of travelling on trains that are slower than they were in the 1920s, frequently dirty, far too frequently late, and always uncomfortable, my constituents are being asked to pay hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of pounds a year, just to travel to work. There is no question in the mind of anyone compelled to use the line but that British Rail, far from imposing a fare increase on those passengers, should reduce their fares until it can deliver a service which is at least reliable.

In a recent response to one of many letters that I have written to BR, the south eastern director claimed that 75 to 85 per cent. of the commuter trains on the line arrive according to schedule "when they run". The last phrase is significant, and commuters would certainly quarrel with that account of train punctuality.

Are things improving? On the contrary, the management's response to falling passenger revenue appears to be to raise fares and cut services. The south eastern director says that the planning and marketing manager had "a successful meeting" with the Transport Users Consultative Committee earlier in the summer to discuss new timetables. In a letter to me, the secretary to the TUCC, John Cherry, said:

> "The Committee had anticipated that Network SouthEast would hold consultation over the proposed alterations and possibly defer any action until the start of the Winter time table. Regrettably this was not the case."

In a later paragraph he said:

> "I regret that NSE made it very clear that 'business' objectives have the over-riding priority whilst customer service is in second place. It has even been stressed that achieving the required quality of service targets—punctuality, overcrowding levels etc—will be taking a back seat in relation to saving costs."

In the private sector, a service industry which did not provide service would be out of business and its management out of jobs. It is small wonder that passenger revenue is declining.

When one contrasts BR's "successful meeting" with the TUCC's impression of

> "no opportunity to offer a constructive response to these proposals",

it becomes clear why commuters who use Cannon Street station were told in the summer of improvements that would disrupt services for eight weeks, which was then extended to 12 weeks and which in a recent notice to passengers was extended indefinitely. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham referred to the effect of that on employment. Some firms in the City of London will not employ potential employees who use Cannon Street because their timekeeping is known to be unreliable. Yet those passengers face a further inflationary fare increase. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to intervene. The fare increase must be scrapped until a reasonable service is available. If investment in British Rail is a question of priorities, I must insist that the worst line in Network SouthEast be the top priority. We need new signalling, new track, new rolling stock and a new approach to management which puts service first. And we need it not when we can piggyback on the channel tunnel rail service in 10 or 15 years' time but now. We need to start that programme of renewal today.

2.48 pm

The Minister for Public Transport (Mr. Roger Freeman): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham (Mr. Moate) in particular, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Thanet, North (Mr. Gale), on raising this important subject. They have been at the forefront of a legitimate campaign to bring to their constituents improvements in the quality of British Rail services. I share their desire, as does British Rail, to have better rail services along the Kent coast.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Thanet, North for having the fairness of mind to report that his journey on the train today was on time. I have just returned to Euston from Birmingham and my train was on time. I am sure that when I catch the 4 o'clock train to my constituency it will also depart on time. We do not congratulate British Rail enough when it performs well. We inevitably focus on the occasions when the service falls down. I place on record my congratulations to InterCity on the service that I enjoyed this morning. It did an excellent job and provided a courteous service, the trains were clean and they ran precisely to time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham raised three issues relating to fares, the PSO grant and the timetable for ordering equipment. It is the Government's intention—in line with the general principles of the citizens charter—not only that the conditions of carriage should be reformed, which is in hand, but that a fare compensation scheme should be introduced which is workable and equitable. The Government also welcome British Rail's policy to seek to distinguish in the rate of fare increase between the different lines by the quality of the service offered, not anticipated.

I am sure that British Rail would be the first to say that the precise fare proposals placed before passengers for implementation in early January did not fully meet the wishes of all Members of the House in terms of differentiating between the lines. An excellent start has been made by distinguishing between the London, Tilbury and Southend line and other lines which, rather like the Kent coastal service, have received an average fare increase and those lines, particularly running north of London, including the Northampton line to my constituency, where services have demonstrably improved.

We no longer have debates about the quality of services on the Northampton line and I dare say that when the turbo trains are fully introduced on the Chiltern line we will no longer have any questions about the quality of service there. A slightly higher fare increase than 7·9 per cent. has applied to those lines.

I accept what my hon. Friends have said, however, and when it comes to the next round of fare increases, greater consideration should, if possible, be given to a greater differentiation between lines. I shall certainly convey that message to British Rail as it is a fair point and in accordance with the spirit of the citizens charter.

On the PSO grant, British Rail's investment programme is running at £1,000 million per annum. Despite the recession, the programme for this year and next year will be delivered. However, the recession has had a dramatic effect on the finances of British Rail and has had even since I visited the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Thanet, North several months ago.

The recession has had a dramatic effect in terms of a fall in revenues, lost receipts from property sales and property developments such as at Liverpool Street station. In the past two years such property developments have been difficult to repeat. As the recession ends and the economy grows again, the effects of that recession will reverse. However, in the middle of the financial year 1990-91, which ended six months ago, the public sector, the Treasury, had to find extra resources for British Rail. That meant that about £416 million extra—a higher external financing limit—had to be allowed for British Rail for that year.

In the middle of the financial year 1991-92, exceptionally, my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State and I had to go back to the Treasury and obtain from it an extra £400 million of taxpayers' resources simply to keep British Rail at a standstill.

Those are exceptional sums in the middle of the year. We are in the midst of a process of refixing the expenditure of British Rail for the next financial year, 1992-93 and the succeeding two years and we are faced with much the same pressures. Those pressures are exceptional.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham spoke of the PSO grant. That was £500 million in 1989-90; it went up to £600 million in 1990-91; and for 1992-93 I forecast the outturn at close to £800 million. So the PSO grant—that is, the revenue subsidy provided in cash by the Government to British Rail by the way of grant to permit it to run Network SouthEast and Regional Railways—is rising substantially.

I labour that point because it is the background against which we must make sure that British Rail maintains its investment programme and adds the projects to which my hon. Friends referred. We cannot avoid talking about the Kent link services; those Networkers do not serve the constituencies of my hon. Friends, but the programme is costing £700 million to provide upwards of 800 new coaches and the lengthening of platforms—work that is largely complete—to serve 12-coach trains. It is important that that programme is completed before attention is turned to the Kent coastal services to bring relief to the congestion that arises from shorter trains. Once we reach the stage at which British Rail can run 12-car trains, congestion will be relieved for commuters coming in from Sevenoaks and Dartford, although that is still a few years off. Once that programme has been completed, attention can be turned to the Kent coastal services.

To break the production of that new rolling stock and insert trains—for example, the 471s—for the Kent coastal services would not be good value for money. The manufacturers, GEC and BREL in the case of the Networkers, would have to retool the production line because the 471s are slightly different trains. Having broken the production line, they would have to start again by retooling so as to finish the inner Kent Networker services and that would be costly.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham rightly said, no one has suggested that it is a question of anything other than when the trains will be delivered. There is no question whether they are needed. I acknowledge that the service is inadequate. The figures for 1991-92 show that for the Kent coastal services, so far this year punctuality at the morning peak is 90·7 per cent., slightly better than last year when it was 86·4 per cent., but for the afternoon and evening peak it is still poor; 83·8 per cent. of trains arrive within five minutes of their scheduled arrival times against a target that we have set the Kent coast lines of 88 per cent. Service provision—that is, whether the train runs—is adequate, but the cleaning, exterior and interior, is not adequate, although the exterior cleaning situation has had more to do with the water shortage than with the policy of British Rail.

In terms of congestion factors, the figures show clearly that the service is inadequate. The degree of congestion on the trains is unacceptable. So it is not a question whether British Rail will replace the rolling stock but when. I cannot hold out any hope at this stage of advancing the date of 1995, four years hence, for the new services to start running and that includes the two-year manufacturing period. The cost will be over £0·5 billion. Undoubtedly the trains will provide a quicker, more reliable, more comfortable and less congested service.

I am anxious to be helpful and perhaps more hopeful than my remarks so far imply. As and when the economy recovers—if it recovers faster than, prudently, British Rail expects—it may be possible to advance that investment programme. I give my hon. Friends that assurance. Perhaps private sector finance can come into British Rail—for example, in freight. Every £1 million of private sector finance that is attracted between now and 1995 for a discrete freight service on lines that run into a single terminal will help to release other resources that are needed for valuable schemes such as the 471s.

I join my hon. Friends in hoping very much that the service on this line will improve, but I assure them that in our discussions with the Treasury and British Rail my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State and I will do all that we can within reason—we cannot print money—to advance the date from 1995 to provide what is badly needed on the Kent coast lines: new signalling and new rolling stock.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 21 October 1991

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

Labour Statistics

1. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many people are currently unemployed in Merthyr and Rhymney; and what estimate he has of the number of job vacancies available.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hunt): Before I answer that question and with your leave, Mr. Speaker, I wish to say that our thoughts are very much with the people of Aberfan. In saying that, I know that I speak not only for the House, the people of Wales and the people of the rest of the United Kingdom, but for people across the world.

The figures are 7,394 and 519.

Mr. Rowlands: May I thank the Secretary of State for those kind and sympathetic words which will be greatly appreciated in Aberfan? It has been my privilege to represent Aberfan in this House for the best part of 20 of those 25 years. I have witnessed the determination, courage and commitment of the community to rebuild itself. Our thoughts are certainly with the many personal friends and families who have to live with those terrible memories and grievous loss.

May I remind the Secretary of State that the pit was closed two years ago and that in March the deep navigation pit next door at Treharris was closed? Next month Penallta is to close, thus leaving the south-east Wales coalfield with only two pits, Taff Merthyr and Tower. Will the Secretary of State give us his personal assurance that he will not be party to any coal board privatisation which, according to the Rothschild report, would mean the complete closure of all pits in south-east Wales, thus destroying the true great mining tradition?

Mr. Hunt: I very much join with the remarks of the hon. Gentleman at the outset of his supplementary question.

Only this morning I was reflecting that in 1947, at the time of nationalisation, we had 229 pits in Wales whereas now we have five and that in 1947 we had 124,000 people employed whereas now we have just over 1,000. From those statistics people can see the tremendous transformation that has take place in Wales. Equally, it imposes an obligation on the Government not only to sustain the coal industry——

Mr. Rowlands: The Welsh coal industry.

Mr. Hunt: Yes, the Welsh coal industry. The first pit where I went underground was Point of Air in north Wales —which sometimes we forget is one of the Welsh coal mines. We must also provide the job opportunities that will be needed in the Wales of the future.

Mr. Barry Jones: I thank the Secretary of State for his remarks about the community of Aberfan and for associating all of his Department and the people of Wales with what he said.

I welcome the Dow Corning investment in the Vale of Glamorgan, which is a credit to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) and all concerned. Has not the Secretary of State failed to appreciate the seriousness of the situation over which he presides? I am talking about the 12 successive monthly increases in unemployment in Wales, the 40 per cent. rise in unemployment in Wales this year and now a spate of redundancies that are causing grave concern. Will he admit that in communities such as Aberdare, Merthyr, Bridgend, Rhondda, Pontypridd and Swansea the situation is a national disgrace? Will he tell us now what is his strategy to make Wales the best and most successful economy in Europe?

Mr. Hunt: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks.

I take this opportunity to say that I am delighted today to be able to announce a major investment package of more than £14 million, involving the creation of 470 jobs. Each of the projects is backed with regional selective assistance from the Welsh Office. I hope that that communicates to the hon. Gentleman that not only are we determined to provide more job opportunities, but we are putting our money where our mouth is.

2. **Mr. Ron Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has to alleviate the current levels of unemployment in *(a)* Rhymney Valley, *(b)* Mid Glamorgan and *(c)* Wales.

Mr. David Hunt: The range of measures operated by the Welsh Office, the Welsh Development Agency and all Government agencies are aimed at combating unemployment. We shall continue to look for and respond swiftly to opportunities that have the potential to reduce unemployment.

Mr. Davies: Many of my hon. Friends will join me in my constituency at Ystrad Mynach to commemorate the closure of Penallta colliery which means the loss of 300 jobs and the end of the coal industry in the Rhymney valley. Since even the former Prime Minister has now acknowledged that she is "painfully aware" of the destructive nature of the Government, will the Secretary of State, as an act of contrition and a public apology to the people of Wales for the past 12 years, care to join us at that commemoration next week?

Mr. Hunt: I have nothing to apologise for. It is most discourteous of the hon. Gentleman to try to lay at the door of a Conservative Government what has happened in the coal industry. I have already given the figures on that industry and he will know from them that far more pits were closed under Labour Governments than under Conservative ones. During the 1980s a series of Conservative Governments brought new jobs to different parts of Wales. They have transformed Wales with the biggest land clearance programme in Europe. It is about time that the hon. Gentleman acknowledged that, just as the 1980s were the decade in which Wales was transformed, the 1990s will be the decade of opportunity.

Mr. Gwilym Jones: Is not the best way in which to continue to expand the soundness of the Welsh economy not to follow the moans and groans of the Opposition, but to continue the pragmatic and enlightened approach that my right hon. Friend and his predecessor have followed? Those are not my comments, but those of the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) as reported on "Wales on Sunday".

Mr. Hunt: I take the opportunity to thank the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) for his kind remarks about the enlightened policies of myself and my predecessor.

Mr. Foot: These shameful unemployment figures are far higher than those at any time in the post-war period when a Labour Government were in power. How much is the latest increase in unemployment due to the abandonment of effective regional policies by the right hon. Gentleman and his predecessors which has meant that, for Wales, the slump goes deeper and it will take us longer to get out of it? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the abandonment of those regional policies was done in defiance of recommendations from the Opposition?

Mr. Hunt: Among the package of announcements that I am delighted to be making today is one of a joint venture between Germany and Sweden in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency for the manufacture of automotive exhaust downpipes and silencers at Tredegar. There is another project relating to the tie and neckwear factory at Nantyglo. Those two projects alone will create nearly 100 jobs. I hope that that will demonstrate to the right hon. Gentleman our determination to continue to bring job opportunities to Wales and his constituency.

Mr. Raffan: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming today's announcement by Knitmesh in my constituency that it is to create 67 new full-time jobs and 58 part-time ones? Will he also join me in congratulating British Aerospace at Broughton on securing the Japanese air self-defence contract with 27 British Aerospace jets? Does my right hon. Friend agree that those announcements bode extremely well for jobs in north-east Wales?

Mr. Hunt: I am glad to respond to my hon. Friend's invitation to welcome the investment by Knitmesh of nearly £2 million, about which I am delighted. I was also extremely pleased to be present, with the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones), at the opening of the new wing factory at British Aerospace and I was delighted to hear of the good news since. All that represents good prospects for the future.

Water Quality

3. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what progress has been made in implementing the EC directives on bathing water quality and drinking water quality.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Nicholas Bennett): We brought both directives into United Kingdom legislation and have given major investments to water undertakings to ensure that the directives are met.

Mr. Griffiths: Yes, but the Minister must be aware that we have not met the deadlines set in the directives. I had hoped that this afternoon the Minister might have been able to tell me when, as a result of discussions with the chairman of Welsh Water, he expects the bathing water and tap water quality directives to be met in Wales. Has there been any slippage, as I believe, in the investment programme announced on the privatisation of Welsh Water? Perhaps the Minister does not appreciate the seriousness of the problem, but in parts of Cardiff more than 20 per cent. of the water has lead levels above the safety limit. Does he agree that it would be far better for Welsh Water to invest money in improving water quality than in buying shares in South Wales Electricity and other such companies?

Mr. Bennett: Welsh Water is investing £1·8 billion over 10 years in the water industry in Wales—that is £500,000 every day for 10 years—and it is doing an excellent job. Its programme will mean that shortly no lead pipes will be in Welsh Water's control and it has put forward a £10 million programme to help householders to get rid of lead pipes in their homes.

Mr. Grist: Will my hon. Friend confirm that Britain is the most successful EC country in providing decent, clean water and that we are honest in our testing, we publicise our testing and we obey the directives, unlike some of our partners?

Mr. Bennett: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, because 99 per cent. of Welsh drinking water already meets or exceeds EC standards. It is distressing that the Labour party spends all its time running down Britain when our record is much better than that of our European partners. One need only smell the Rhine at Cologne or go on the beaches in the Mediterranean or Greece to see that our European partners have a long way to go to catch up with British standards.

Mr. Wigley: Does the Minister accept that it is unreasonable to fund that large expenditure, which must be met, from the charges made for water? Does he accept that the profits retained to fund such improvements in capital works have driven up the price of Welsh water to the extent that some of my constituents, pensioners living in single-bedroomed flats, pay £220 a year in water charges? Is not that ridiculous? The Government must look at means of funding general improvement work other than through the taxation now charged by Welsh Water.

Mr. Bennett: The hon. Gentleman must look at the facts. Welsh Water is spending £108——

Mr. Wigley: Answer the question.

Mr. Bennett: I am answering the question, if the hon. Gentleman would listen. Welsh Water is investing £108 for every £100 that it collects in charges. The average charge to consumers in Wales is 55p per day, which is a small charge. I admit that, to some people, it is a considerable amount to collect in one lump, but it can be paid over a period of 10 months. It is important that we get over the period of neglect of the last Labour Government, when investment fell to an all-time low.

Labour Statistics

4. **Mr. Roy Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the most recent unemployment figure for Wales.

Mr. David Hunt: On 12 September, the latest seasonally adjusted figure for unemployment was 120,200.

Mr. Hughes: Does the Secretary of State appreciate that it will cost £21 billion to keep 2·5 million people on the dole this year, 120,000 of whom are in Wales? In the Newport travel-to-work area, the unemployment rate is now 11·7 per cent., with 27 people competing for each vacancy. Is not that a disgraceful record for the Government after 12 years and is not it time for the people of the country to be allowed to give their verdict on that record?

Mr. Hunt: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that five years ago the figure was 180,000. One area where there has been a substantial reduction has been in the long-term unemployed. I am sad that the hon. Gentleman did not take the opportunity to highlight the successes that have taken place in and around his constituency through new investment and the marvellous news about Imperial park. Imperial college has decided to set up a science park in the area around the hon. Gentleman's constituency. That is marvellous news for the future of Wales.

Mrs. Clwyd: If the Secretary of State is so proud of his record, will he explain why, under three successive Secretaries of State, unemployment in the Cynon Valley has been the highest in Wales? If he and the Coal Board have nothing to hid on privatisation, why was I denied access to the only remaining pit in the Cynon Valley, Tower colliery, the week before last? Will he give the men at Tower colliery, which is now making a profit, a categorical assurance that, despite two or three previous redundancies in the coal industry, they now have a secure future in the Tower colliery in Cynon Valley?

Mr. Hunt: Whether or not the hon. Lady can gain access to the colliery is a matter for British Coal, not me. I regret that she failed to repeat the words of the chief executive of Cynon Valley council who said that Cynon Valley was rapidly becoming the land of high-tech investments. It is exciting that we are now seeing a number of new investments——

Mrs. Clwyd: Come on!

Mr. Hunt: The hon. Lady should not downgrade the achievements of her council, which is doing extremely well in attracting new investment. I am delighted about the investment—the joint venture of the Gooding Sanken group—which is to take place next year.

Mr. Geraint Howells: My colleagues and I would like to be associated with the sentiments expressed earlier this afternoon.

I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware that the people of Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire are disappointed that, after 12 years of Tory rule, Fishguard is at the top of the unemployment league with a rate of 18 per cent. and Cardigan has 17 per cent. That is not a very good Government record and my constituents are disturbed. How long will they have to wait before unemployment levels move down the league and the average rate is closer to that of other constituencies—6 per cent?

Mr. Hunt: I much appreciate the hon. Gentleman's first remarks.

As for Fishguard and Holyhead, I greatly regret that there are some traditional pockets of high unemployment in Wales and we must use every way possible to feed new opportunities through to those districts. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will pay tribute to the substantial investment being made in north Wales, through the A55 corridor of opportunity. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Minister of State will be present at the opening of the Conwy tunnel. I am also delighted at the M4 development in the south, towards west Wales, which will open up many opportunities in south and west Wales.

Mr. Murphy: Bearing in mind all the talk that we have heard this afternoon about the appalling level of unemployment in the Principality, is not it exactly the wrong time for the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to be asking for major cuts in the training budget? Now that the Secretary of State has responsibility for training in Wales, will he confirm that, in Wales, career development loans and business enterprise training will continue? Most importantly, precisely what proportion of the £100 million cuts in youth training and the £100 million cuts in employment training will be borne by the people of Wales?

Mr. Hunt: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised the subject of training. As he will know, resources are a matter for discussion within government and the House will be informed about that subject in the autumn statement. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman mentioned training, because I regard a key move to be the Prime Minister's transfer of the responsibility for training from the Department of Employment to the Welsh Office. It gives us a marvellous opportunity in Wales and I have set up a training, enterprise and education unit within the Welsh Office which seeks to bring together those three key sectors of responsibility to formulate future training policies with the training and enterprise councils—the first of which in the United Kingdom was set up in Wales. Those are exciting developments.

Job Losses

5. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the total number of jobs that have been lost by outward investment, or the export of existing jobs overseas, in the past 12 months.

The Minister of State, Welsh Office (Sir Wyn Roberts): We do not hold those figures, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that nine inward investment projects have been secured for his constituency in the past 18 months, promising some 450 jobs and that the magnificent Imperial science park being established there will create many hundreds of top-quality new jobs in addition to those provided by the new Patent Office.

Mr. Flynn: While the loss of jobs from Newport and Llanelli to firms overseas is serious enough, what is more worrying is the loss of jobs from Newport to other parts of the United Kingdom. Is the Minister aware of the claims made by the previous Secretary of State for Wales that the Toyota jobs were in the bag for Wales until the previous

Prime Minister called in the Toyota boss and told him that she wanted the jobs to be located in Derby because of the large number of marginal seats in that district? She also promised to match the grant available in Wales for Derby.

Is the Minister further aware that the Prime Minister flatly denied the claim and told me that the Government neither encouraged nor discouraged Toyota in its choice of site? Will the Minister guarantee today that should future jobs bonanzas come to Wales they will not be stolen by Huntingdon man using the Huntingdon charter to site such jobs in Huntingdon?

Sir Wyn Roberts: The hon. Gentleman has revealed himself as rather smaller-minded than I had thought. Of course I have seen the Prime Minister's reply to him—it contains what I have already said. The eventual decision was for Toyota itself to take. There were competing claims within the United Kingdom and overseas. That is entirely credible and, bearing in mind the fact that Toyota did not require Government financial assistance, it is inconceivable that any pressure could have been brought to bear on it.

To listen to the hon. Gentleman one would think that we in Wales had some God-given right to every investment. We do not.

Mr. Dickens: Does my right hon. Friend accept that inward investment in the United Kingdom in general and in Wales in particular was outstanding last year? What have been the investment opportunities in the first six months of this year?

Sir Wyn Roberts: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have done extremely well with inward investment. Last year about 147 projects were secured, promising 15,000 new or safeguarded jobs and capital investment of about £585 million. In the first six months of this year we have had 102 projects, promising 10,800 jobs and about £735 million worth of investment. It is incredible that one has to go to a rival region such as Catalonia, which I visited last week, to hear just how well we are doing in Wales.

Mr. John P. Smith: It is true that I will always warmly welcome good news for my constituency wherever it comes from, especially good news relating to public money being used to pave the way for investment. It is a pity, however, that many of my colleagues cannot enjoy such good news because of what is happening in Wales.

In the light of the announcement about Barry, may we look forward to an early decision on the establishment of a rail link to Cardiff-Wales airport which will further increase investment opportunities in Barry and the rest of south Wales?

Sir Wyn Roberts: The hon. Gentleman and I have been over this ground on a number of occasions and I know that he knows only too well that this is primarily a matter for South Glamorgan county council to put forward in conjuction with British Rail. Then, if such a proposal is made, we can consider it.

Citizens Charter

6. **Mr. Hind:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the numbers of representations he has received from the people of Wales on the implementation of the citizens charter in Wales.

Mr. Nicholas Bennett: So far we have had more than 70 representations, we have published 28,000 copies of the citizens charter in Wales and we have already published the education charter for parents. Shortly, we hope to publish the tenants and patients charters.

Mr. Hind: Will my hon. Friend take every opportunity to remind the parents of Wales that through the parents charter they will have greater choice, a vastly increasing flow of information from schools and a much-improved say in the running of those schools and the education of their children? That contrasts with what the Labour party would give them: a reduction in say and choice and a great reduction in the powers that they as parents would enjoy.

Mr. Bennett: I could not agree more. Not only would the Labour party ensure that parents did not get information about exam results—it opposed the idea when the relevant Bill was passing through the House—but it would abolish city technology colleges, do away with grant-maintained schools and get rid of the assisted places scheme. The whole policy of the Labour party is to scrap, demolish and oppose. It has no constructive suggestions on education.

Mr. Anderson: Will the aggrieved private citizen in Wales be able to complain about evasions and delay by the Welsh Office? The aggrieved people of west Wales have been waiting three years since they were promised that the second cardiac unit would be sited in west Wales. Will they be able to complain about that delay in spite of the Welsh Office promise?

Mr. Bennett: If the people of Wales have a complaint about the Welsh Office they can complain to the parliamentary ombudsman. My job is to ensure that all the policies of the Welsh Office are put forward as speedily as possible for the people of Wales.

Mr. Alex Carlile: Will the Welsh Office publish a railway sufferers charter for Wales pointing out that the considerable investment in industry between Shrewsbury and Aberystwith has been met by British Rail by the withdrawal of all InterCity services west of Wolverhampton? Will that railway sufferers charter also ensure that people can not only complain, satisfying though that is, but can see some improvement in the abominable rail services west of Shrewsbury?

Mr. Bennett: I have considerable sympathy with what the hon. and learned Gentleman says about British Rail, and I have recently had cause to complain about the west Wales lines. The best thing that can happen to British Rail for the passengers is a move towards privatisation so that passengers can have more say and more control over their services.

Health Service

7. **Mr. Denzil Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next intends to meet the chairmen of the health authorities to discuss the future of the health service in Wales.

Mr. David Hunt: On 20 November.

Mr. Davies: When the Secretary of State meets those chairmen, will he discuss with the chairman of the East Dyfed health authority the proposal to close the Mynydd

Mawr hospital in my constituency? That hospital is for the elderly chronically sick, and there is a great danger that services for those people, along with the phrase itself, are beginning to disappear. Is the Secretary of State aware that however good acute and rehabilitation services, and whatever the expectation of life, unfortunately in the last three years of their lives many people will need to be looked after in hospital? Will the right hon. Gentleman look with disfavour upon that proposed closure and on any proposal to close a hospital for the elderly chronically sick?

Mr. Hunt: I understand that East Dyfed district health authority is consulting on the transfer of services for the elderly and that consultation ends on 2 November. If the community health council objects, the proposals will be decided by the Secretary of State.

Mr. Rogers: When the Secretary of State meets the chairmen of the health authorities will he discuss with the chairman of Mid Glamorgan health authority the delays in hospital reorganisation in the Taff Ely—Rhondda area, which have led to considerable underprovision? Although a new hospital is opening, there will be a substantial loss of beds in the area. I know that the Secretary of State has made arrangements for a meeting on 24 November and I am sure that he will receive with sadness, as will Opposition Members, the news that Mrs. Mattie Collins, the leader of Rhondda borough council for many years, died yesterday. At that meeting, which I hope to attend in her place, will the Secretary of State have an answer about this hospital reorganisation?

Mr. Hunt: At that meeting I look forward to discussing these issues with the hon. Gentleman. I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the life of Mrs. Mattie Collins, who did such a tremendous amount for her area. I know that the news of her death will have been received with great sadness in all parts of the House.

Mr. Raffan: Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the doctors, nurses and ancillary staff at Glan Clwyd and Wrexham Maelor hospitals on treating 1,000 more patients this year than originally expected? Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is yet further evidence of the excellent national health service available to those living in the Clwyd health authority area?

Mr. Hunt: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The health service in Wales is now treating a record number of patients, it has a record level of funding and the proposed reforms are receiving enthusiastic support from a number of health service managers because they will ensure that the record level of funding is spent in the best possible way for the patients.

Mr. Gareth Wardell: When the Secretary of State meets the chairmen of the health authorities in Wales, will he make three things abundantly clear to them? First, will he make it clear that they are responsible, with a continuing role, for looking after the long-term intensive care of the elderly? Secondly, will he ensure that funds are available so that general practitioners can refer their patients to the hospital that they deem to be appropriate for their treatment? Thirdly, will he look again at the position of the orthopaedic hospital Rhydlafar, in Cardiff, to ensure that money is made available so that those arriving for major hip and knee operations are not referred back to their general practitioners? The money ran out before the summer recess, which is a cruel deception when that centre is available.

Mr. Hunt: On the hon. Gentleman's third point, he will know that we received a tremendous number of bids for waiting times for 1991-92, requiring funding of about £5 million against the £1·3 million that was available. Against that background, we were unable to support the bid in full. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman knew this, but I am happy to tell him that a further £64,000 to support 40 additional operations in 1991-92 will be made available. I will respond to the hon. Gentleman on his other points.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about funding. I do not want any impression to be given—I want only the facts to be made clear. They are that in 1979 in Wales the health service received £481 million. At 1991 prices that is £1,113 million. We are spending £1,769 million, so we are funding at record levels.

Mr. Livsey: Does the Secretary of State realise that wards in psychiatric hospitals are still being closed despite the fact that there are inadequate facilities for community care and that the Mid Wales hospital in my constituency, at Talgarth, is the subject of a feasibility study? Will the Minister give us an assurance that no psychiatric patient will be discharged into the community without proper facilities being made available?

Mr. Hunt: I am happy to give that assurance. I thought that all-party support had been given to the policy of moving people into the community, with the requisite support services. We in Wales should take pride in the fact that, although admittedly we are not so far forward as many of us would like to be, we have made considerable progress under the mental handicap strategy.

Mr. Barry Jones: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that Pembroke health authority was given £50,000 by the Welsh Office to pay for its application for NHS status? Will he rule out, here and now, any further such bribes to get NHS hospitals to opt out of local health authority control? The people of Wales reject the handling of our health service by the Under-Secretary of State and they do not support the Secretary of State's policies on our health service.

Mr. Hunt: The answer to the first point is yes. The answer to the second point is that it was not a bribe—it was finance to fund the preparation of the first application for NHS trust status in Wales. I make it clear that neither I nor my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State will entertain applications for NHS trust status unless we are convinced, first, that the hospital concerned will stay within the NHS, secondly, that it will be financially viable and, thirdly, that the change will result in better patient care. I can put that across clearly to the hon. Gentleman.

We are still being criticised on NHS funding. Let me put it in simpler terms. When we came into power in 1979, the health service was spending £171 for every man, woman and child in Wales. That was not a bribe—that was the level of spending that the Labour Government had reached. Uprated to 1991 prices, it would be £396. We are spending £614 for every man, woman and child.

Urban Renewal (Holyhead)

8. **Dr. Marek:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) of 10 June, *Official Report*, column *456*, what action he has taken in connection with rail services under his responsibilities for initiatives for urban renewal in Holyhead.

Sir Wyn Roberts: The provision of rail services in Holyhead is the responsibility of British Rail. I have granted supplementary credit approvals of £250,000 to Gwynedd county council in the current financial year to fund the high-speed train refuelling facilities at Holyhead.

Dr. Marek: What else does the Minister intend to do to ensure that Holyhead retains its position as the centre for freight travelling to and from the Republic of Ireland, especially in view of British Rail's stupid decision to use the route from Liverpool to Belfast and then transfer freight by lorry to Dublin? Also, what does the Minister intend to do to reinstate the InterCity service between north Wales and Euston? The 9 pm train from Holyhead was withdrawn a few weeks ago by British Rail, and between 100 and 150 people had to stand all the way to Crewe, packed into a four-car sprinter unit.

Sir Wyn Roberts: On the last point, I am sure that British Rail will be glad to hear of the heavy demand for its services. The hon. Gentleman knows that there has been an increase in the number of services available to take people, if not to Euston from north Wales, to Manchester and Crewe where they can take connecting trains for London. As for freight, we must make the services from Holyhead more competitive. The more I study the question, the more I realise that we lose freight traffic because we are not so competitive as we should be.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Clergy Stipends

27. **Mr. Ian Taylor:** To ask the right hon. Member for Selby, representing the Church Commissioners, what recent consideration the Church Commissioners have given to the current stipend of a vicar.

Mr. Michael Alison (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The Commissioners, as the central stipends authority, review stipends regularly and will consider them again at a conference with dioceses in November, and at the annual stipends conferences which take place each spring. The current average stipend of an incumbent is about £12,100 per year. In addition, he receives some benefits in kind, including free accommodation and a non-contributory pension, the average value of which is estimated by the Commissioners to be £7,260.

Mr. Taylor: Will my right hon. Friend carefully consider taking £1 off a vicar's stipend every time that vicar uses the new Prayer Book which has been published by one of the oldest publishing houses in the country and in which the Lord's Prayer refers to God as "Our Mother and Father"? Is it not sensible that curates who are themselves confused about bisexuality should not try to confuse their congregations about whether Jesus was a hermaphrodite?

Mr. Alison: My hon. Friend makes a serious point, albeit in a light-hearted style. The liturgy of the Church of England is approved by Parliament and therefore has a statutory basis. It would be unlawful to make any unauthorised liturgical change of gender in the Lord's prayer or in any other authorised liturgical service. In that respect, the restraint of the law is even more potent than pay restraint. My hon. Friend refers to the identity of Jesus. He will know from the Gospel that His most popular self-designation was "Son of Man", which is a double positive—or a double negative, depending which way one looks at it.

Church Urban Fund

28. **Ms. Hoey:** To ask the right hon. Member for Selby, representing the Church Commissioners, whether the Church Commissioners have reconsidered their contributions to the church urban fund for 1991.

Mr. Alison: The Commissioners board of governors will review the position with regard to a grant for the church urban fund towards the end of this year.

Ms. Hoey: Will the right hon. Gentleman convey to the board of the Church Commissioners the concern that will be felt in inner city areas if the grant of £1 million given in the past four years is not fully restored? It will be seen as a downgrading of the great work that the Church has done in the poorest areas in the inner cities and among the disadvantaged. I ask the right hon. Gentleman to remind the Church Commissioners of the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury who said last week of the church urban fund:

> "It brings hope where none seemed possible."

Will the right hon. Gentleman convey those thoughts to the governors?

Mr. Alison: I take careful note of what the hon. Lady has said and I will certainly convey to the Church Commissioners her views about the need to return to the £1 million grant. However, she will bear two points in mind. The church urban fund this year will, from its own resources, be able to maintain the level of its grants even in default of the Church Commissioners' £1 million, because it already has a substantial income. The money that we would otherwise give to the church urban fund this year will go to clergy stipends, and will especially be slanted and directed towards the poorest inner city parishes. What the church urban fund loses, the poorer parishes get through the maintenance of their stipends.

Clergy Stipends

29. **Mr. Bowis:** To ask the right hon. Member for Selby, representing the Church Commissioners, what provision is made for public consultation over clergy stipends.

Mr. Alison: The Commissioners, as central stipends authority, consult dioceses at least once a year about future stipend levels and take account of their views when making recommendations. A report is submitted annually to the General Synod which may debate the report if it chooses.

Mr. Bowis: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is considerable public concern that for many family men the level of stipend is inadequate? At the same time, many people share the view of the noble prelate the Archbishop of Canterbury that perhaps there should not be total security of tenure in parishes. Will my right hon. Friend encourage widespread consultation to see whether there cannot be a new system of payment of stipends to take on board those two points, perhaps by using some form of incentive payments?

Mr. Alison: I take careful note of what my hon. Friend has suggested. The notion of productivity in the cure of souls is difficult to administer fully, humanely and consistently. He will have noticed the level of stipends and the supplementary payments that are available, thanks to the Church Commissioners' successful administration of their funds in recent years. There has been a 75 per cent. increase in the level of stipends in real terms, greatly outpacing the rate of inflation. There is more land to be possessed and more to be done. We will do our best to follow through my hon. Friend's suggestion.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Toilet and Changing Room Facilities

33. **Mr. Janner:** To ask the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the House of Commons Commission, what steps the new Director of Works will take to improve staff toilet and changing room facilities.

Mr. A. J. Beith (on behalf of the House of Commons Commission): The Director of Works, who is a member of the department of the Serjeant at Arms, took up his post in July, but he will not become directly responsible for the parliamentary works programme until it is transferred to the Commission from the Department of the Environment next April. In the meantime, I will ensure that any concerns that the hon. and learned Gentleman has are made known to the relevant authorities.

Mr. Janner: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many of the facilities for staff members in this Palace are wholly unworthy and in many cases disgusting? Is he aware, for example, that the waiting staff changing rooms have been moved to the former office of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), the leader of his party, who I understand has moved out? None the less, there is no security and nowhere for the staff to lock away their clothes. They are not even allowed to have keys to the door. Will the hon. Gentleman look into the matter and try to arrange for our staff to have the facilities to which they would be entitled anywhere else?

Mr. Beith: The Commission is well aware of the need. New changing and rest facilities have been made available at No. 1 Parliament street, where those criticisms will not apply. I will look at the specific points raised by the hon. and learned Gentleman and ensure that they are brought to the attention of the appropriate authorities.

Mr. Dickens: Does the hon. Gentleman feel that if the toilet facilities in the House of Commons are sufficient for the hundreds of people who visit the House of Commons each day, they should by the same token be sufficient for the staff who work in the building?

Mr. Beith: Those matters do not fall within the responsibility of the Commission until the transfer of the works next April. It will be our intention that there should be adequate and excellent facilities for staff members and visitors.

Refreshment Department

34. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the House of Commons Commission, what recent reviews have been undertaken of the payments and conditions of service of staff of the Refreshment Department; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. Beith: Pay reviews for the non-industrial and industrial staff of the Department took place on 1 April and 1 July respectively, and pay increases for both groups of staff have been implemented recently in line with civil service pay agreements. The Establishments Office of the House has reached the final stage of negotiations with the relevant unions on the introduction of a simplified grading and pay structure for non-industrial grades, which will affect a small percentage of Refreshment Department staff. In addition, consultations have proceeded along similar lines for the industrial grades. The Commission has recently agreed proposals put forward by the Board of Management, and has authorised the Establishments Office to commence negotiations with the Hotel and Catering Union.

Mr. Skinner: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that when the £3·40 barrier was broken for the hourly rate paid to House of Commons refreshment staff, no one was sacked and, incredibly, more staff have been employed since then? Will those staff be treated in the same way as Members of Parliament when the next review is carried out? Will they be awarded pay rises of no less than 6·5 per cent., and when their pensions are calculated, will the Commission ensure that those pensions are in line with the recommendations of the Top Salaries Review Body, which is so embarrassed about the 60 per cent. pension increase awarded to some top civil servants that it has postponed the increase until after the general election? Will the hon. Gentleman guarantee that staff will receive the same increase, and that they will receive it before the election?

Mr. Beith: It is quite some time since the House broke through the £3·40 barrier to which the hon. Gentleman referred. As for pensions, staff—unlike Members—receive non-contributory pensions, along with a series of other benefits, which makes it difficult to compare their terms with those operating outside the House. A package containing a number of improvements is, however, currently the subject of negotiation.

Mr. Charles Wardle: Bearing in mind the number of people who work in the Refreshment Department and elsewhere in the Palace of Westminster, and the number of visiting officials from Government Departments—not to mention the number of right hon. and hon. Members—what can the hon. Gentleman do to promote the idea of establishing a mini-supermarket on the premises? Given the hours worked by all employees in the Palace, it is sometimes very difficult for them to find their way to a shop to buy essential supplies.

Mr. Beith: The hon. Gentleman's interesting suggestion does not arise out of this question.

Disabled Employees

35. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, representing the House of Commons Commission, how many people employed by the Commission are registered disabled; and what proprtion this is of total employees.

Mr. Beith: Of the total number of staff employed by the House of Commons, eight—that is, 0·7 per cent. of the total—are registered as disabled. The Commission's policy with regard to the employment of disabled persons is set out in its annual report of 1981-82, and—together with a summary of the positive action taken by management to increase the recruitment of disabled staff—was printed in the answer given on 13 June 1991 to a written question to me from the hon. Member for Paisley, South (Mr. McMaster).

Mr. Corbyn: Is that not a most unsatisfactory reply, and is not the situation disgraceful? Legislation suggests that a minimum of 3 per cent. registered disabled should be employed. There is no reason on earth why, having passed that legislation, the House cannot implement it.

The hon. Gentleman has said that a statement about a positive action programme was made in 1981-82. That was 10 years ago, and an amazing total of eight people with disabilities are now working in the building. That is a disgrace. I urge the Commission to consider this as a matter of urgency, and to increase the number of vacancies for people with disabilities, providing a model for the rest of the country and demonstrating that we do not believe that those who suffer from disabilities are unable to work gainfully.

Mr. Beith: The numbers that I gave did not include all who work in the building: the staff of the Property Srvices Agency were not part of the staff of the Commission.

The authorities have taken positive action beyond the 1981 statement to ensure that disabled persons are aware that applications from them would be welcome. Measures include a statement to that effect in all advertisements, encouraging disabled people to state whether they are registered; keeping close links with the disablement resettlement officers, and organisations representing disabled people, to which all job vacancies are sent; and facilitating the placement of disabled students for work experience. Disabled applicants will normally be shortlisted for interview if they are appropriately qualified. We are anxious to improve the figure as, I know, are many other employers.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Annunciator System

36. **Mr. Butler:** To ask the Lord President of the Council if he intends to upgrade the annunciator system.

The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. John MacGregor): There are as yet no firm proposals to upgrade the annunciator system, but the first step has been taken. During the summer recess, a consultant has been investigating the requirements for a cable network covering the entire Palace, which would provide hon. Members with information technology facilities but could also carry a modernised annunciator system. His report is expected to be presented before the end of the year.

Mr. Butler: Is not the technology for the annunciator system nearly a quarter of a century old? When we have a new system, will it be able to take an audio feed from the Chamber?

Mr. MacGregor: I believe that it is nearly a quarter of a century old. However, it was decided a little while ago that as the system was still working satisfactorily it did not make sense to change it outside the context of an examination of a cable network for the House as a whole. We have therefore taken the first steps in that regard, and the House will recall that the matter was debated in July 1991. Shortly after that debate, the House of Commons Commission gave the necessary approval for the consultancy study. That is now proceeding and we shall progress to the next stage after that.

Dr. Cunningham: May I strongly support the reply of the Leader of the House to the hon. Member for Warrington, South (Mr. Butler)? We should not waste money on an outdated annunciator system when we need to recable the House so that hon. Members can have access to information systems, data bases and as many television channels as we decide appropriate. I hope that we would decide that it was appropriate to have the live feed from the House as well.

Mr. MacGregor: The hon. Gentleman knows that I agree with him about how we should proceed on that matter. He will be aware that after the consultancy study the next stage is to set up a specialist working party to draw up the specifications for the interfaces required to produce a list of approved computers. The other matters can also be considered.

Televising the House

37. **Mr. Tony Banks:** To ask the Lord President of the Council how many complaints he has received from members of the public and hon. Members regarding the televising of the House.

Mr. MacGregor: I have received a few letters from members of the public making general comments, but I am not aware of any complaints about the way in which the televising operation itself has been carried out within the House during the current Session.

Mr. Banks: Televising the House of Commons is one bit of television output about which the Prime Minister does not have to write a letter of cringing apology to someone because it has, of course, been so successful. Following what the right hon. Gentleman said in reply to the previous question, when shall we have television from gavel to gavel so that people can tune in to the debates that they want to watch rather than the debates chosen for them by broadcasting journalists?

Mr. MacGregor: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been extremely successful in the House in the way that he comes over on television. The hon. Member for Newham, North-West (Mr. Banks) will be aware that the Select Committee on Broadcasting, &c. hoped that a continuous service operated by United Artists would be available from this autumn. There have been technical and legal problems with the Marco Polo satellite, but it is hoped that live continuous coverage of the proceedings of the House will be available from the Marco Polo satellite to cable subscribers in the new year as soon as the problems have been overcome.

Mr. Simon Coombs: I support what hon. Members have said about the need for live television coverage to be provided in the offices of hon. Members. When does my right hon. Friend expect the consultant's report to be available to him and, in due course, to the House?

Mr. MacGregor: We hope that the consultant's report to which I referred earlier will be available towards the end of the year—probably by the end of November.

Building Work

38. **Mr. Janner:** To ask the Lord President of the Council if he will make a statement on the forthcoming transfer of responsibility for building work in the Palace of Westminster.

Mr. MacGregor: Following the appointment of the Director of Works in July, good progress is being made to set up the new organisation which will assume responsibility for works services.

Mr. Janner: Will the Lord President of the Council be kind enough to arrange for a survey and census of the hazards in this building to elderly and infirm people who use the House? Meanwhile, will he use his powers at least to conjure up some railings for the stairs leading down from Westminster Hall to the interview rooms, down which to the right hon. Gentleman's knowledge an elderly, charming and kindly peer recently fell and was very lucky not to be severely injured?

Mr. MacGregor: I will certainly arrange for that particular matter to be looked into. The hon. and learned Gentleman is aware that we are about to undertake a major study with regard to access for the disabled, and that will include some of the points to which he referred.

Office Allowance

40. **Mr. Hind:** To ask the Lord President of the Council if he will make a statement on his plans to review the parliamentary office allowance.

Mr. MacGregor: As I announced in a written answer on 25 July 1991, I wrote to Sir David Nickson, chairman of the Top Salaries Review Body, on 24 July, asking him to conduct a review of the office costs allowance. Sir David has since replied, agreeing to produce a report by the middle of February.

Mr. Hind: My right hon. Friend will be aware that many hon. Members feel that they are short-changing their constituents because of their lack of resources, particularly in dealing with the large number of letters and constituency problems that they receive. Will my right hon. Friend put his weight behind the inquiry to ensure that more research facilities will be available by way of additional cash and help in dealing with the large number of matters that we are now asked to sort out?

Mr. MacGregor: I put my weight behind having the review undertaken so that all those matters could be looked at by the TSRB—including, of course, hon. Members' increased work load. My hon. Friend will know, however, that the TSRB wishes to conduct a comprehensive survey of hon. Members in relation to their use of staff, office costs and their views on the allowance, which would clearly include the points that my hon. Friend has raised. I am sure, therefore, that he will wish to make his views known to the TSRB.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the House authorities look carefully at the possibility of providing a special allowance for Members who like to keep their staff in their constituencies, in addition to the office costs allowance which is currently paid? That would have the double effect of paying for facilities in constituencies and taking pressure off accommodation in London, so we might solve two problems with one stone.

Mr. MacGregor: My hon. Friend may wish to put that point to the TSRB, together with his reasons for it. It would, of course, be for the TSRB to make recommendations.

Palace Tours

41. **Mr. Simon Coombs:** To ask the Lord President of the Council what is his estimate of the number of people who toured the Palace of Westminster last year; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. MacGregor: I am advised that in 1990 the estimated total number of visitors to the Palace of Westminster in Members' parties was 112,265. In addition, 6,720 schoolchildren took part in tours as part of the autumn visits programme organised by the education unit.

Mr. Coombs: Has my right hon. Friend had an opportunity to consider the point that I raised with him in the summer—that greater encouragement should be given to allowing people who are not connected with Members of Parliament to visit the Palace during the summer recess?

Mr. MacGregor: I indicated in my reply to my hon. Friend during the summer some of the difficulties involved, particularly those of a security nature, and the various hoops that would have to be gone through. The position has not changed.

Mr. Cryer: Will the Leader of the House do something about a point of order that I raised before the summer recess? I refer to the provision of a room in which disabled visitors to the House can relax. When I took a party of blind students around the House, they were provided with absolutely no facilities at all. It is disgraceful that they cannot be taken anywhere for a cup of tea, they cannot be allowed to sit down anywhere, and there is no room for them. Groups of blind students have to be pushed to one side to allow rich pickings from the corporate entertainment in private dining rooms. It is about time that practice stopped and proper facilities were provided.

Mr. MacGregor: The whole House will be aware of the pressure on accommodation in the Palace. The hon.

Gentleman's point is for the successor to the Accommodation and Administration Sub-Committee to consider if he would like to put it to it.

Terrace Marquee

42. **Mr. Harry Greenway:** To ask the Lord President of the Council if he has any plans to seek to retain the marquee on the terrace all the year round; and if he will make a statement.

Mr. MacGregor: There are no plans at present to keep the terrace pavilion in operation for the whole year. Any permanent construction would need planning permission from Westminster city council and the approval of the Royal Fine Art Commission and English Heritage. It is unlikely that the terrace pavilion, while appropriate for its present use, would be considered a suitable permanent structure.

Mr. Greenway: Does my right hon. Friend accept that, even if planning permission would be hard to come by, the terrace pavilion is a useful facility he should explore ways in which it can be maintained all the year round in view of its popularity and the demand for it?

Mr. MacGregor: My hon. Friend is certainly right about the demand for it. The facilities have been well received and have been heavily booked by hon. Members. Having the pavilion all the year round, which was examined by the Service Committee in the past, would involve problems at times of year when it is not currently used. I refer to problems of wear and tear, and possibly even loss of the whole facility. Maintenance and refurbishment would have to be done on site, too, and it is felt that that is more effectively done elsewhere. However, it is a matter that the Services Committee, or its successor under the Ibbs proposals, could bear in mind.

Mr. Dick Douglas (Dunfermline, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I will take the statement first.

Social Security Benefits (Uprating)

3.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Tony Newton): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the uprating of social security benefits. This will take place for most benefits, as is now the normal practice, in the first full week of the tax year—that is, the week beginning 6 April. The statutory instruments to implement my proposals, applying to both Great Britain and Northern Ireland, will in due course be laid before both Houses for debate and a full schedule of the new benefit rules is being placed in the Vote Office.

I will, as usual, deal first with the main national insurance benefits, including in particular the retirement pension which now goes to some 10 million people. The bases for the uprating will be the latest available information about the increase in the retail prices index over the past year: that is to say, the rise of 4·1 per cent. in the 12 months to September.

Our firm and continuing commitment is to increase the pension fully in line with prices. Next April, therefore, the basic pension will go up by £2·15 a week for a single person, from £52·00 to £54·15, and by £3·45 a week for a couple, from £83·25 to £86·70. This will increase expenditure on retirement pensions by around £1 billion.

Public service pensions will also be increased across the board by 4·1 per cent. as will war widows' pensions and war disablement pensions. I am glad to be able to tell the House on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence that the special Ministry of Defence payment to the pre-1973 war widows will similarly go up from £44·36 to £46·18 a week. This special payment will, of course, remain tax-free and continue to be disregarded in calculating entitlement to income-related benefits.

All other national insurance benefits will be increased by 4·1 per cent. taking unemployment benefit, for example, for a single person from £41·40 to £43·10 and from £66·95 to £69·70 for a couple. Maternity allowance and lower rate statutory maternity pay, both of which were increased in real terms in the last uprating, will be increased from £40·60 to £42·25 and from £44·50 to £46·30 respectively.

National insurance sickness benefit will go from £39·60 to £41·20 for a single person and from £64·10 to £66·70 for a couple. As the House knows, however, most short-term sickness is now covered by statutory sick pay administered by employers, in which a number of changes were made last year. The new arrangements, including the special provisions for small employers, appear to be working well and I do not propose to disturb them except to increase the lower rate of SSP, which goes to employees currently earning between £52 and £185 per week. This will be increased by the retail prices index, from £43·50 to £45·30. The higher rate, which goes to the better-paid employees, of whom the great majority are in any case covered by occupational sick pay schemes, will remain at £52·50, since I judge that the cash required to increase it can more sensibly be used to improve the position of sick and disabled people in other ways.

I turn next to the income-related benefits—income support, housing benefit and community charge benefit. By convention, since the main housing costs of income support claimants are met separately and directly, these benefits have been uprated by an index which seeks to exclude such housing costs.

As the House is aware, since these benefits were uprated last year, there has been a £140 reduction in the community charge, which in turn has meant a reduction of £28—over 50p a week—in the amount which those on income support are expected to meet from what was included in their benefit for that purpose. There is therefore a strong case for adjusting benefit rates accordingly to produce an expenditure saving of £200 million. I do not propose to do that.

I have, however, concluded that it would be right in these circumstances to align the calculation of what is called the Rossi index more exactly than at present with the items the costs of which people are expected to meet from their benefit. This entails including within it not only 20 per cent. of community charge, but certain miscellaneous housing costs, and water rates, which have not previously been covered in the calculation. This will put the index on a more logical basis for the future—indeed, the inclusion of water rates also responds directly to a number of representations that we have received from welfare rights bodies and others.

The result is to produce an uprating index of 7 per cent., nearly 3 percentage points higher than the full RPI. Other things being equal, that would entail a small reduction in the cost of the uprating, by comparison with the use of the previous less comprehensive calculation. But that will not in fact happen, because I propose to devote rather more than the sum involved to an additional increase in the income support premiums for pensioners who are disabled or who are over 80. Those premiums will be increased, over and above the 7 per cent., by £1 a week for a single pensioner and £1·50 for a couple, contributing to overall increases in income support for this group of £5·10 a week, from £58·10 to £63·20 for a single person, and of £7·70 a week, from £88·45 to £96·15 for a couple. The cost will be £60 million.

Nearly 600,000 pensioners will gain to the full extent through income support, and over 400,000 will gain through increases in housing benefit and community charge benefit. It will thus build further on the series of measures that we have taken in recent years to give extra help to the less well-off pensioners and especially those who are older which have already increased the pensioner premiums by some £300 million in real terms in the past two years.

All other income support rates will go up by 7 per cent. Thus, benefit for a single person over 25 will increase from £39·65 to £42·45; for a couple with two children aged 10 and 12 from £104·55 to £111·85; and for a pensioner couple aged under 74 from £83·15 to £88·95.

Before leaving the income-related benefits, there are three further issues to which I should refer. The first are called the non-dependant deductions in housing benefit and income support for housing costs—that is to say, the contribution expected from the income of a non-dependant, living in the household of a claimant, in calculating the householders' benefit. Here I have received representations that these deductions, however reasonable in concept, are at too high a level for those on lower incomes. I shall therefore shortly be consulting the Social Security Advisory Committee and the local authority associations on a proposed restructuring of the deductions from next April.

Its effect would be to reduce the contribution expected from anyone whose income is below £130 a week—including a reduction of over a quarter, from £5·70 to £4,

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in that applying to a non-dependant who is not in full-time work or whose income is below £65—but to expect a somewhat larger contribution than at present, £18 instead of £13·50, from those in full-time work with incomes over £130 a week. While giving what I believe will be widely seen as a fairer and more sensible structure and once again helping the least well-off, these proposals would reduce benefit expenditure by about £50 million.

This, however, helps me to make much more substantial increases than would otherwise have been possible in the second area on which I need to touch—the income support limits for residential care and nursing homes. Unlike other income support rates, these include provision for housing costs. But I intend to make increases significantly greater than inflation, raising support in this field by nearly £200 million, or some £80 million more than would come from simply uprating the limits in line with the retail prices index.

After the very large increases made last year in the limits for nursing homes, I have concluded in the light of the available evidence and the representations made to me that the right course is a general increase in virtually all the limits of £15 a week, thus giving a proportionately larger increase this year to people in residential care homes. For the residential care limits in two categories—those for the very dependent elderly and for the mentally handicapped, who between them cover almost 40 per cent. of all residential care home cases—I propose an increase of £20.

In only one case do I propose an increase below £15, which is in respect of the limit sometimes known as the terminal illness limit for nursing homes. Originally intended primarily to give additional help to hospices, it has not proved very effective for that purpose, since many hospices do not make charges and there is therefore no basis on which their patients can claim the special rates of income support. As a basis for distinguishing between nursing homes, it has become increasingly artificial and difficult to operate. I therefore think it right to make only a £5 increase in this limit, thus narrowing the gap between it and other nursing home limits, and to steer additional help to hospices in two other ways.

One is to make changes in the rules for attendance allowance and from next April also the new disability living allowance, which will give more than £2 million of additional benefit to people in voluntary hospices. The other is to make available from the social security budget a further £1 million towards the direct funding of hospices as part of the Government's commitment to increase their contribution to the movement. This sum will be made available through the Department of Health. I believe that these moves will be widely welcomed.

With that one exception to which I have referred, all limits will increase by more than 5 per cent., with the limit for the very dependent elderly in residential care homes going up by about 10 per cent.—making a total increase in this very important category, covering about a third of all elderly people in residential care homes, of 32 per cent. in three years. The Greater London additions for both residential and nursing homes will also be increased to £25 and £35 a week respectively.

Finally in relation to the income-related benefits, I should tell the House that the additional resources for the social fund which my right hon. Friend the Minister of State announced in August, increasing this year's grants budget by some £10 million and the loans budget by some £30 million, will be fully carried through into provision for 1992-93, when the budget for the two elements together will be almost £300 million—30 per cent. higher than the budget initially made available in 1991-92. That is, of course, in addition to the greatly improved arrangements for cold weather payments, which are outside the budget and which, should the need arise, will be made automatically. Some 400,000 more people than previously would be eligible for payments.

I turn now to families with children. As I said in my statement this time last year, child benefit is and will remain a strong element in our policies for family support. That has been underlined by the further increase which has taken place this month, announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget, together with the undertaking that the benefit would in future be increased in line with prices.

After having reviewed the benefit levels in accordance with my statutory duty, I have decided that the right course for next April is to increase each of the rates which have just come into payment by the full 4·1 per cent. RPI increase for the whole year to September, even though they will have been at their present level for only six months. This will raise the payment for the eldest eligible child by 40p to £9·65 and the rate for other children by 30p to £7·80. One-parent benefit will also rise, by 25p to £5·85 per week.

At the same time, we shall continue with our policies to give greater help to low-income families with children, including not least those in work whose earnings are modest. That too, has been underlined by the increases in income support and family credit made in parallel with this month's child benefit increase. The relevant benefit rates, including the family premium and the age-related amounts for children, will all be increased in April by 7 per cent.

On the latest figures, family credit is now going to a record 356,000 families, 30,000 more than a year earlier, at an average level of more than £30 a week. That gathering success will be further reinforced next April by reducing from 24 to 16 the number of hours of work needed to qualify, which we expect to enable another 30,000 families to benefit immediately and a further 35,000 in due course. I shall shortly be consulting the Social Security Advisory Committee on proposals designed to ensure a smooth transition to those new arrangements and more generally to improve the speed and accuracy with which claims are processed.

While those changes will help families of all kinds, they are likely to be of particular help to lone parents who wish to work, who already account for more than one third of those helped by family credit. We have already improved the earnings disregard in housing benefit and community charge benefit. The introduction of the £15 maintenance disregard in those benefits next April will mean that lone parents receiving maintenance will still be better off in work on family credit with earnings up to £50 below what they would need at present.

The changes in family credit, together with the new maintenance disregard, will increase expenditure next year by some £70 million. That will mean that since 1988 we have made available some £600 million extra in real terms through the income-related benefits to improving the position of less well-off families with children.

I come now to benefits for sick and disabled people, to whose needs we have consistently sought to give special attention both in promoting and improving existing benefits and in developing new ones.

All the main disability benefits will go up by the 4·1 per cent. increase in the RPI, thus raising invalidity benefit in line with the retirement pension, and both severe disablement allowance and invalid care allowance from £31·25 to £32·55. The invalidity allowances payable with invalidity benefit, and since December 1990 the similar additions payable with severe disablement allowance, will also be appropriately increased.

The main disability premiums in income support, including the greatly enhanced premium for disabled children introduced 18 months ago, will, of course, rise by 7 per cent., so that, for example, the benefit for a family with a disabled child of 12 will increase from £107·60 to £115·10 a week.

Apart from the strategic improvements in benefits for disabled people, to which I will come in a moment, I have a number of detailed changes to make which will be of significant benefit to those affected. The residence qualifications for severe disablement allowance will be brought into line with those for comparable benefits, making it easier for people coming or returning to this country to qualify. Families with children under 16 who receive social security help with care costs will, when the child has to go into hospital, keep that help for up to 12 weeks instead of four. The earnings limit for invalid care allowance will be further increased from £30 to £40.

A number of possibilities for simplification of the war pensions scheme are currently under discussion with representative bodies, in a joint effort to improve the working of the scheme. While I do not intend to make decisions on most of the issues involved until those discussions have been concluded, I have decided to add the war pensioners dependency allowance into the basic war pension for all disablement pensioners, which is not only a helpful simplification, but will give small gains to some 50,000 people. This group of small improvements involves a total additional cost of about £4·5 million.

I am also able to inform the House of our plans for further substantial increases in resources for the independent living fund, which is providing assistance to more than 10,000 severely disabled people. The provision for next year will rise by some 40 per cent, adding more than £20 million to this year's level of £54 million. That will ensure that the fund continues to play an important role in helping people with disabilities to live independently in the community in the run-up to the full implementation of community care.

Although not strictly an uprating matter, I should also take this opportunity to tell the House, following consultation with the Social Security Advisory Committee, that I am today laying revised regulations to re-establish the original policy intention underlying the income support severe disability premium, whose purpose is to give extra help to severely disabled people living independently of their families, but which has, in some cases, been extended well beyond that by the creation of artificial tenancy arrangements within one household. While accepting that the regulation re-establishes the clear policy intention when the premium was introduced, the committee has asked that steps should be taken to ensure that no disabled person should lose an already established entitlement. I gladly accept that. In those cases, appropriate protection will be provided at an additional cost of £5 million, compared with the proposal originally referred to the committee.

From next April, mobility allowance and attendance allowance for those under 65 will be replaced by the new single extra costs benefit—disability living allowance, or DLA. Those entitled to them will be automatically transferred to the new benefit and the relevant rates will be set at 4·1 per cent. above those of the existing allowances. Thus the higher mobility component of DLA will be £30·30—£1·20 above the current mobility allowance—and the two upper rates of the care component will be set at £43·35 and £28·95, £1·70 and £1·15 a week respectively above the current attendance allowance rates. Attendance allowance itself will be similarly increased for those over 65, for whom it continues.

At the same time, two new tiers of DLA will be introduced, giving help with care or mobility costs—or both—for the first time to some 300,000 people for whom the existing benefits do not cater. Among the gainers will be 10,000 severely mentally handicapped people with serious behavioural problems, who cannot at present get help with their mobility costs and who will qualify for the top rate of the mobility component.

The new lower rates of disability living allowance will be set not at the £10 a week on which discussion of the new structure was based, but at £11·55, which in effect applies this year's and last year's uprating to the original figure. For those on the lowest incomes, receipt of even one of the lower rates of DLA will bring entitlement to the disability premium in the income-related benefits. Thus, those on income support will be nearly £30 a week better off.

In April, we shall also introduce the new disability working allowance, helping up to 50,000 disabled people who wish to work but have limited earning capacity, by enabling them to top up those earnings with benefit. The rates governing its assessment are set out in the schedule to my statement. They will mean, for example, that a single person could earn as much as nearly £100 a week, while still being entitled to some disability working allowance, and with it the disability premium in housing and community charge benefit, together with the reassurance which disabled people have been seeking of a much extended linking period back to their old incapacity benefit, should they be unable to continue working.

The new disability benefits mark a further important stage in a programme which, in the past two years, has already included real increases in the disability premiums both for adults and children, the introduction of a carer's premium and of additional payments with severe disablement allowance, the extension of mobility allowance to the deaf-blind, and the extension of attendance allowance to severely disabled babies and the terminally ill.

Overall, by 1993-94, the better part of 1 million disabled people will be gaining from this programme, either through real increases in existing benefits or entitlement to new ones, to a total of some £300 million. With earlier changes and the massive expansion that has taken place in the coverage of mobility allowance, attendance allowance and invalid care allowance, it will mean that, next year, expenditure on benefits for disabled people and carers will be no less than two and a half times greater than in 1979.

Despite the difficult circumstances, we have been able to commit ourselves to the uprating that I have outlined today, at a cost of over £3 billion. We have honoured and

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confirmed our pledge to retirement pensioners. We are doing more for those who are older and least well-off, more for families with children, and more for disabled people. Those are our priorities, and I believe that they will be widely endorsed.

Mr. Michael Meacher (Oldham, West): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that pensioners will be bitterly disappointed by the statement? Not only is £2 a week a miserly increase but, contrary to the Government's promise, the increase does not protect pensioners against inflation. Is he aware that the RPI has fallen to 4·1 per cent. largely because of the cuts in mortgage rates, but as almost no pensioners have mortgages, the relevant inflation index for pensioners is the underlying rate excluding mortgages, which is 5·7 per cent.? Is he aware that his announcement today short-changes pensioners by nearly £1 a week? Is not, £2 a week increase for pensioners an insult? It is not even enough for a pound of sausages and a couple of loaves, while workers on average pay are receiving increases of more than £20 a week and some executives, increases of more than £2,000 a week.

The Prime Minister talks of a society with the power to choose. By giving pensioners an increase of £2 a week, is he not giving them the obligation to go without? If the Chancellor can afford to spend nearly £2 billion by cutting income tax by a further 1p in the Budget, as he keeps hinting, is it not time that pensioners were given priority —as Labour now proposes, with £5 and £8 a week increases, and the restoration of the pension link with earnings—instead of having to be at the end of the queue, as they always are under this Government?

Will the right hon. Gentleman admit that, if the Government had not broken Labour's pension link with earnings, thereby cutting pensioners out of rising living standards for the past 11 years, he would be announcing —*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members may try to shout me down, but they will not stop pensioners learning the truth about this statement.

If the Government had not broken the link 11 years ago, would not the right hon. Gentleman now be announcing a single pension of £70 a week instead of £54, and one of £111 a week for a married couple, instead of £86? Will the right hon. Gentleman admit that he is saving £450 million this year alone at the expense of pensioners by refusing to uprate the pension in line with earnings—three times as much as the total pre-election sweetener for pensioners announced today?

The right hon. Gentleman claims that he is concentrating extra resources on the poorest. He is not. Will he confirm that the 7 per cent. increase for those on income support that he announced today is less than the rate of inflation for people whose housing costs are wholly met from other sources? Is he aware that the poorest pensioners of all are the 900,000 living below the income support level who will get only the 4·1 per cent. increase, which will not even keep up with the true rate of pensioner inflation?

We welcome the £15 a week increase in DSS payments to those in private residential homes, but has the right hon. Gentleman noticed that the latest survey by Price Waterhouse—the same company that the Government used a year ago—shows that the average shortfall in DSS payments is not £15 or £20 a week as he announced today, but more than £60 a week? Will he confirm that the Government, having pushed nearly 200,000 frail, elderly residents who are on income support into private homes, are still nowhere near meeting the charge imposed by the homes, so both the residents and their families continue to face anxiety and the threat of eviction?

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the increase in child benefit that he has announced goes no way to restoring the cut in its real value in the three-year freeze since 1987? Will he confirm that the shortfall is still more than £2 a week per child for the second child and subsequent children; and that since this is the last uprating before the election, it means that only Labour will now make good the substantial cuts from these Tory years?

The most noteworthy aspect of this statement, despite its extreme length, is its omissions. Why did the right hon. Gentleman say nothing about the young homeless, deprived of all benefit by him and reported by many citizens advice bureaux to be starving? Or does he regard them, like Sir Bernard Ingham, as "a blot" on the domestic and tourist landscape; or like the Minister for Housing and Planning, who described them the other day as people you trip over on your way to the opera?

Mr. Robert G. Hughes (Harrow, West): Disgraceful.

Mr. Meacher: It is indeed disgraceful—for once I can agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Will not the right hon. Gentleman create more young homeless by the £50 million increase in the non-dependent deductions that he has announced? Why has he said nothing about the unemployed, whose benefits have been cut by £1·5 billion a year since 1979 and whose unemployment benefit is as a result only one third of the level paid to unemployed people in France of Germany? If the right hon. Gentleman is really interested in assisting the poorest, why has he offered no new money for the social fund, applications to which, due to sharply rising unemployment, have risen fast recently, but refusals of which are rising even faster?

Why has the right. hon. Gentleman said nothing about ending the payment of 20 per cent. of the poll tax by the poorest in our society? Even today there was the announcement of an ingenious new way of funding the £140 reduction in the poll tax by cutting——

Mr. John Marshall (Hendon, South): Nonsense.

Mr. Meacher: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman does not understand this, but it is being done by cutting the Rossi index for the very poorest.

After this statement, more than 10 million people will still be forced to try to cope at the new income support level of £42·50 a week, one seventh of the average wage. Does the right hon. Gentleman really believe that that is sufficient for one sixth of the population to feed, heat and clothe themselves for months and sometimes years on end? The Prime Minister is producing not a classless society but a "couldn't care less society", and this statement will confirm our status as the poverty capital of Europe.

Mr. Newton: The hon. Member for Oldham, West (Mr. Meacher) has been rather more restrained than usual when reacting to my statements, but I cannot honestly say that he has been more sensible. It is quite clear that we have put more resources into the social fund and that they are being fully carried through next year.

The hon. Gentleman's point about the young homeless in relation to non-dependant deductions is manifestly absurd because I made it plain that increased deductions were to be expected only from those earning more than £130 a week.

I have listened to the hon. Gentleman's endless attempts to make something out of child benefit, but I must remind him that we have put £600 million more into helping less well-off families, and expenditure on families with children is now higher than if, over the past three years, we had increased child benefit alone.

I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has yet had a chance to look at the Price Waterhouse survey, but when he has examined it he will see that, taking regional variations into account, the report does not substantiate his suggestion that much more is needed than the new rates that I announced today.

What the hon. Gentleman says about pensioners would be rather more credible if he had said last year, when we made an increase of almost 11 per cent., much of which was associated with the rise in mortgage rates, that we had given a real increase to pensioners. As always, of course, the hon. Gentleman tries to have his cake and eat it. He should know that, if pensions had been uprated only in line with the pensioner price index, which seeks to measure pensioners' costs specifically, the increases over recent years would have been a great deal less than those that we have made in line with the retail prices index.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to confirm some figures, which no doubt he has carefully calculated, about what would have happened if we had pursued Labour's policies in respect of uprating. If we had pursued those policies, pensioners would now be a great deal worse off. We have already seen pensioners' incomes increasing generally far faster under this Government than under the previous Government. If the hon. Gentleman wants confirmation of the risks that pensioners would face if we went along with the inflationary tactics of the hon. Gentleman, he should look no further than to the activities of the shadow Chancellor and shadow Chief Secretary, who go round the country saying that the hon. Gentleman's promises in this area are not promises at all.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the excellent package of benefit increases, especially the increases in child benefit. Will he confirm that the full inflation uprating means that there will be three increases in child benefit within the space of a year?

Mr. Newton: Yes, I can confirm that, and I am pleased to have been able to announce this further increase which, as I said, uprates a six-month benefit rate by a full year's inflation.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey): Many things in the statement are welcome, especially the assistance for people in residential and nursing homes, for the over-80s, for families with children and for those who are mentally ill or in long-term categories of sickness or disability. The disappointments in the right hon. Gentleman's statement, and therefore the evidence of his failure to win the battle with the Treasury, relate to those on income support, who will still have to pay 20 per cent. of their poll tax, and pensioners. Although the Secretary of State rightly says that last year pensioners got more than the cost of living increase, this year they will receive significantly less—about 3 per cent. less across the board —and in relation to basic pensions they will not have a guarantee of a full pension, irrespective of contribution for the country as a whole. The great failure is that pensioners are the victims of the statement.

Mr. Newton: I need hardly say that I do not share the hon. Gentleman's view; nor will many people when they have had the opportunity to study what I said in more detail. I have put another £60 million into real increases for the older, less well-off pensioners, about £70 million into helping less well-off families with children, and about £80 million above the RPI into the area of residential care and nursing homes. That will help rather more than 200,000 less well-off pensioners. The new levels of disability benefit, which will take benefit to people who do not get anything at all at the moment to help with costs, are worth £120 million. I do not regard that as defeat, and I do not think that other people will, either.

Mr. Andrew Bowden (Brighton, Kemptown): Is my right hon. Friend aware that these increases will be widely welcomed throughout the country? Will he emphasise to the House that, under the policies of the last Labour Government, the savings of millions of pensioners were crucified by a 26 per cent. rate of inflation? If Labour returns to office, precisely the same thing will happen again. Will my right hon. Friend turn his attention to the residential care allowance, especially in the south-east? We have special problems because our expenses and costs are much higher than those in most other parts of the country.

Mr. Newton: I am grateful for the first part of my hon. Friend's question. I know that he takes a strong and continuing interest in this subject, which is a great credit to him. On his latter point, I cannot at this stage undertake to introduce yet another complicated regional arrangement into the residential care and nursing home limits. My hon. Friend will have noticed that I increased the Greater London allowance, although I realise that that does not quite meet the point that he was making, as I increased it for nursing homes last year. I hope, too, that he will not overlook the importance of the increase that I made for the dependent elderly—a 32 per cent. increase over three years —which will help about one third of those in residential care homes.

Mr. John Battle (Leeds, West): Is the Minister aware that on 24 June this year, the European Council of Ministers agreed that VAT would be increased by up to 9 per cent. on fuels and some food items? Would that not, at a stroke, completely wipe out in the next financial year the increases for pensioners that he has announced today?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that these matters are under discussion in another place and go well beyond what I am in a position to comment on in the House today. He will also know that increases in prices, of whatever kind, are faithfully reflected in the indexes that we use, and shall continue to use, to uprate social security benefits.

Mr. John Hannam (Exeter): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on producing an extremely generous uprating of benefit in such difficult times. In particular, I welcome the £100 million extra for disabled people. He has

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increased the independent living fund by 40 per cent. Will he ensure that that excellent source of funding for severely disabled people continues?

Mr. Newton: My hon. Friend knows better than anybody, given his strong interest in the interests of disabled people, what our commitments have been in respect of helping them to live independently. I, too, welcome the further increases in resources that I have been able to announce this afternoon, especially that in the independent living fund.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I welcome the changes in disability benefits as far as they go, but may I press the Minister on one aspect of the water charges element? As he will know, I welcome the involvement of this element in income support, and it is a move for which many of us have pressed. However, does he accept that the position of the single pensioner is invidious? For example, the one who saw me last week, with a water charge of £220 on a single-bedroomed house, will have an increase in her water charges of RPI plus X, which will erode her pension by 50p immediately. She will not be helped by the announcement that the Secretary of State made today, because she is not on income support. Therefore, will he consider extending what he is doing for income support to all pensioners?

Mr. Newton: The dispute over the index used for income support has been over the fact that, until my announcement this afternoon, it did not include water rates. It follows that water rates are included in the retail prices index, which has been used for uprating pensions generally.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Bearing in mind the promise that we heard today from the hon. Member for Oldham, West (Mr. Meacher) to restore an earnings link to retirement pensions, may I ask my right hon. Friend to take this opportunity to remind the House that, although the last Labour Government introduced an earnings link, they were so strapped for cash that they were unable to implement the proposal? Is it not bare-faced cheek for the hon. Member for Oldham, West to pretend that it would not be the same again?

Mr. Newton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding the House that the last Labour Government found a way of, in effect, leaving out six months' inflation so as to save what would probably now be about £1 billion, largely at the expense of pensioners.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Monklands, West): Does not the Secretary of State feel at least embarrassed that he has confirmed in his statement, yet again, that the Government have refused to implement the community care sections of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 for at least another three years? Does he realise that even the marginal improvments in benefit that he has announced for people in private residential homes should mean that we have arm's-length inspections to ensure that minimum standards prevail? Why is he prepared to accept the absence of value for money, of inspection and of any strategy for community care?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman, to whom I also pay tribute for the interest that he takes in such matters, knows of the various steps being taken to introduce a more independent element into the registration of residential care homes through new arrangements within local authorities. He will also be aware of all the steps taken towards the introduction of what I believe will be improved community care arrangements in 1993. Some of what I have announced this afternoon will underpin them, but, more generally, the arrangements will help disabled people who may not be covered by community care in the sense in which the hon. Gentleman means it but who nevertheless need the assistance of the social security system.

Sir David Price (Eastleigh): Is my right hon. Friend aware that those of us who take a particular interest in the cause of the severely disabled are pleased that he was able to do so much more for the independent living fund, on which some of us have been pressing him for a long time? In view of his obvious confidence in the independent living fund, what is its future?

Mr. Newton: I think that my hon. Friend knows that we have made it clear that we intend to make arrangements for those covered by the independent living fund when the transition to community care takes place in 1993, but that thereafter, in general, it would be appropriate for new cases to look to the overall new arrangements for community care at local level.

Mr. Max Madden (Bradford, West): Is the Secretary of State aware that most people will regard a 4p in the pound increase for pensioners as extremely mean, his silence on increasing the Christmas bonus frozen at £10 since 1972 as extremely miserly and his failure in Cabinet to abolish the 20 per cent. contribution to the poll tax by pensioners as extremely disappointing? Does he accept that the only way in which British pensioners will cease to be the poorest in Europe is to restore a link with earnings so that pensions can be increased by whichever amount increases most? That is Labour's policy and it is the best hope for British pensioners.

Mr. Newton: As I have said several times, if we adopted the European pensions policy so often urged on us, the first result would be that 2 million married women would lose the pensions that they currently receive on their husband's contributions. Secondly, I have not for a long time heard anyone from the Opposition have enough nerve to refer to the Christmas bonus, which for two years they did not pay at all.

Mr. David Nicholson (Taunton): In addition to my right hon. Friend's help for people in nursing and residential homes and for those in hospices—his help for the latter will be widely welcomed by those in the hospice movement in my constituency—is he aware that his effective and caring targeting of help on the poorer pensioners will be widely welcomed? It is in sharp contrast to the extravagant promises made by the Opposition, which would lead to people being either conned or clobbered, or probably both. Will, he, however, ensure that the self-employed have full access to family credit because, as he will be aware, there are some difficulties in that respect?

Mr. Newton: I said in my statement that we are considering various ways in which to improve further the administration as well as the coverage of family credit. I shall certainly bear in mind my hon. Friend's point. I welcome his support for the additional measure that I was able to announce this afternoon for less well-off, older pensioners. That measure means that we have made a great deal of improvement, in one way or another, for less well-off pensioners for three years running.

Mr. Jeff Rooker (Birmingham, Perry Barr): I support the comments made by the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Sir D. Price) about the independent living fund. Does the Secretary of State realise that his answer highlights the fact that there will be two classes of disabled people if and when he does what he proposes to the independent living fund? Some people will have the benefit protected and some will be pushed into the underfunded community care system. Surely it is only equitable to offer the massive benefits in new systems of helping people to stay independent to as wide a section of the community as possible. He must not run away from that.

May I ask the Secretary of State one more question so that we do not get confused? He said specifically that the figure given by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, West (Mr. Meacher) of an underfunding of pensions, if the earnings link was maintained, of £16 for a single person was not correct. Will he explain why it was not correct and, at the same time, offer the House the opportunity to say that it seems unfair that we cannot get a decent link for pensioners at 4·1 per cent. whereas we manage for ourselves a decent link with earnings of 6·5 per cent.? Why cannot we be linked with pensioners or why cannot pensioners be linked with us?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman will know—I hope that he will regard it as sensible—that one of the purposes of the new arrangements being introduced in April 1993 is to produce an across-the-board improvement in arrangements for community care. Although it could have been argued that the most sensible and logical course would be for everybody to move from the ILF into the new arrangements, which I believe will work well, we have said specifically that those covered by the ILF at the point of changeover—in the same way as we have for the residential care and nursing home limits—will continue to be covered by the existing arrangements. That is a sensible and practical step to ease the transition.

On pensioners, I do not think that I said that the hon. Member for Oldham, West had made a mistake in his mathematics. I have not had the opportunity to check. I did not seek to say that. I said that, if the Labour party's policies on the linking of those benefits had been pursued in the way in which the hon. Gentleman urges, we would have gone straight back to the problems that the Labour Government found—that they could not sustain those commitments. They ended up making pensioners worse off.

Miss Emma Nicholson (Torridge and Devon, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not pensioners who are bitterly disappointed by his announcement today, but the Labour party? Its disappointment stems from the magnificence of the increase and the skill in deployment with which he has targeted it on the most needy members of our society. Does he find it especially shameful that the Opposition spokesmen cannot even honestly recognise and accept that we have spent two and half times more than they did in 1979 on that acutely disadvantaged group, the disabled? Is he not ashamed of the Labour party's response?

Mr. Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for her supportive remarks. It is a very remarkable achievement that, by a combination of an improved coverage of existing benefits and the many new steps that we have taken in the past three years, we have so massively increased the amount of support going to that group of severely disabled people.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Although the support that the Government are giving to older pensioners through the extra income support is welcome, does the Secretary of State realise that there is a group of younger pensioners who have suffered a great deal as a result of the Government's policies? They are those put out of work in their fifties, supposedly to make this country's economy work again. In many cases, they have not worked from their middle fifties until their sixties. They are extremely hard up, because they have been on benefits for a long time. Is it not time that the Government targeted some help for them?

Mr. Newton: It will be within the hon. Gentleman's recollection that, although what I announced this afternoon is the premium increase directed to the over-eighties and the more severely disabled less well-off pensioners, last year I made the same sort of real increase in the income support premium for younger pensioners —those between 60 and 74. I thought that the balance this year pointed in the direction that I have announced.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Berkshire, East): Is my right hon. Friend aware that colleagues who represent south-east constituencies, who have had especially difficult hardship cases concerning the elderly in residential homes, will welcome the increase in the residential care allowance by £15 to £20 a week? May I underline what my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Mr. Bowden) said a moment ago? We still have special problems with the cost of residential care in the south-east. I know that it is difficult for my right hon. Friend to give a regional premium, but I ask him to undertake to look at that matter once more for us.

Mr. Newton: I can, of course, assure my hon. Friend that—as my statement made clear—we shall always continue to keep those matters under review. I cannot undertake this afternoon to introduce a regional premium of the kind that my hon. Friend suggests in advance of the move to community care. Having looked carefully at the figures, however, I believe that the increases that I have announced—particularly the larger increase for the very dependent elderly who are in residential care homes—will substantially ease the problem with which my hon. Friend is rightly concerned.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Here we are, at the end of the 20th century. Does the Secretary of State agree that, no matter how the figures are fiddled and regardless of the percentage that is used, the elderly and infirm—the old pensioner and the handicapped person —and, indeed, the single-parent family will still be living in poverty? That is the reality of life for them, now and in April.

Mr. Newton: What I am conscious of is this. The figures suggest that pensioners' average net incomes have risen by some 30 per cent.—rather more, indeed—under the present Government. That is partly because their savings and occupational pensions have been worth more and

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partly because the average rate of inflation has been lower. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's general proposition. What I do accept—and what I have now demonstrated in three successive annual uprating statements—is that for a sizeable group of less well-off pensioners we need to do more and that is exactly what I have done.

Mr. David Martin (Portsmouth, South): May I add my welcome for the £15 uprating for private residential and nursing homes—a form of community care against which the Labour party carries on a relentless and unfair vendetta? May I also thank my right hon. Friend for listening to those of us who want the increases and for acting accordingly?

Mr. Newton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I have certainly listened very carefully to the representations that have been made. In the past week, while making my final decisions, I have met the representatives of a number of organisations—such as charitable and other bodies—and care home owners. I very much hope and expect that the large increases that I announced will be helpful to them.

Mr. Dick Douglas (Dunfermline, West): Does the Secretary of State accept that there should be a direct link between growth in earnings and increases in pension payments and that that principle should be accepted by hon. Members on both sides of the House?

I especially welcome the attention paid by the right hon. Gentleman to hospices, but will he explain a little further? Will he ensure that people in hospices—I do not single out any group, but I am thinking particularly of people suffering from AIDS—are not disadvantaged in any way by his proposals?

I know that the right hon. Gentleman is not directly responsible for students, but will he take into consideration the large number of students who are not covered by the proposals, are being denied benefit and are suffering as a result of the Goverament's provisions?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman will know that the arrangements under which the student loans scheme was introduced, and the arrangements for access funds, include those about whom he expressed concern.

There are two changes relating to hospices. First, an extra £1 million in grant will be given directly to them; secondly, a change is to be made in attendance allowance and then in disability living allowance rules, which at present have the practical effect of making it impossible for many people in hospices either to continue to receive attendance allowance or to claim it for the first time. That problem will be overcome and the change will be worth just over £2 million to people in voluntary hospices.

Mr. Anthony Coombs (Wyre Forest): The increased support for the mentally handicapped—not only in residential care, but in the community—is very welcome. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, over the past 12 years, spending on long-term sick and disabled people has risen from £1,800 million to nearly £13,000 million? Does not that illustrate the Government's commitment to an especially vulnerable group?

Mr. Newton: Yes, it does. As I said in my statement, even when allowance is made for inflation that is an increase of some two and a half times in real terms—which, in my view, constitutes a remarkable record.

I share my hon. Friend's satisfaction with the various ways in which I have been able to steer additional help towards mentally handicapped people. Let me pay special tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Social Security and Disabled People, not least in regard to the ingredient in the new disability living allowance, which will bring extra help to some 10,000 severely mentally handicapped people.

Mr. Harry Barnes (Derbyshire, North-East): There is a mismatch between the start of the tax year—and hence the uprating of benefit—and the local government financial year. That means that council rent increases take place in advance of upratings. The practical consequence is that many people who can ill afford it lose in terms of benefit and related housing benefit provisions for at least a week or so. Will the Government end that fiddle?

Mr. Newton: Any mismatch between the benefit year and the tax year is very small this year given that we are talking about the week beginning 6 April for the uprating of social security benefits. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to look at the point in greater detail, I will.

Mr. Roger King (Birmingham, Northfield): Has my right hon. Friend had a chance to reflect on his excellent proposals this afternoon, which included a worthwhile uprating for the basic pension, and on those presented by an alternative political party for a flat rate increase of £5 for a single pensioner and £8 for a couple, bearing in mind the fact that that political party advocates a standard minimum wage? Would not that have a disastrous impact on shop prices and make that party's proposed increase highly illusory?

Mr. Newton: There is no doubt that, no matter which of the various estimates one takes, the introduction of a national minimum wage would increase inflation to the disadvantage of pensioners and, more to the point, put a lot of people out of work.

Mr. William McKelvey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I welcome the extent of the changes in the rates for nursing homes to £15 and £20 for disabled people, but will the Secretary of State take steps to stop the growing abuse of private nursing homes which are seizing people's personal allowances as part of the rent?

Mr. Newton: This point, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, has arisen on several occasions. It is not a question of seizing anyone's benefit. The plain fact is that benefit is payable to people as individuals and it applies for residential care and the nursing home limit and personal expenses allowance. Only the individual can decide how to use that money.

Mr. Jacques Arnold (Gravesham): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is better to help less well-off families with the breadwinner in work than to make them unemployed through the imposition of a national minimum wage?

Mr. Newton: Yes, I do, and that is why I and my colleagues are proud of the introduction of family credit and of the success that it is becoming.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): The Secretary of State mentioned in his statement the new-found benevolence for the elderly and the disabled. Why has he not tried to deal with the problem of women aged between 60 and 65 who are still disbarred from claiming invalid care allowance and who are dependent on moves in the European Court rather than on this Government?

Mr. Newton: I do not quite know what the hon. Gentleman means by a new-found benevolence, when for three years we have consistently been steering additional help to the groups to whom I have referred: low-income families with children, less well-off pensioners and, not least, disabled people. There is nothing new-found about that. It is a consistent programme which is bringing more help to the groups that we want to help.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will my right hon. Friend find time to produce figures for the benefit of Opposition Members to show the comparison between the incomes of pensioners in the United Kingdom and those in the rest of the European Community? Will he confirm that often when Opposition Members talk about "state" benefits, they are talking about private benefits from employers and trade union schemes in France and Germany? Will he also confirm that benefits in this country are 34 per cent. ahead for the average pensioner and that benefit is being increased for the poorest pensioners by nearly twice the rate of inflation to ensure that those pensioners receive the greatest benefit?

Mr. Newton: As I have now said several times, pensioners' average net incomes have been rising faster than those of the general population during the lifetime of the present Government. Quite apart from the point that I made about married women's pensions paid on their husbands' contributions, many of the comparisons with other European countries, of which the hon. Member for Oldham, West is so fond, totally ignore matters such as the fact that, in Germany, pensioners will be making health contributions which they would not have to make here.

Mr. Bob Cryer (Bradford, South): Does the Secretary of State accept that the increase for pensioners is paltry and will be widely resented throughout the country? On the range of benefits, he knows full well that there is a tendency for administrative means to be used to err on the side of refusing benefits rather than granting them, if there is any sort of discretion. When he puts his statutory instruments before the House, will he state the full range of ministerial directions which accompany them? They should be part of the statutory instruments, and the right hon. Gentleman should not be producing extra legislative power without any authority of the House.

Mr. Newton: Whatever regulations we use to administer the social security system, there will obviously be a need for guidance. By and large, that guidance, unless there is a very good reason for not publishing it—for example, to prevent fraud—is publicly available. I would firmly resist the suggestion that, by back-door means—if that is what the hon. Gentleman meant—measures are adopted to prevent people from getting the benefit that they should get. That is simply not the case. On the contrary, considerable efforts have been made to ensure that benefit gets through to the people for whom it is intended. That is one reason why the extension of disability benefits and the increased expenditure on them have gone as far and as fast as they have.

Sir Jim Spicer (Dorset, West): Does my right hon. Friend accept that all fair-minded people will warmly greet the package that he announced, which amounts to £3 billion? Within that total, the sum of £1 million for hospices might seem small, but that £1 million will act as a multiplier for many people in our voluntary sector, who will turn the sum into many millions of pounds. I thank him for that. As he passes that £1 million to the regional health authorities, will he make certain that Dorchester hospice, which will start work on 6 December, gets its fair share?

Mr. Newton: As I said in my statement, the mechanism will be a transfer to the Secretary of State for Health for distribution under the scheme that he already has for direct help to hospices. I should make it clear that the total amount of benefit that I expect to be gained by hospices arising from this afternoon's statement is not £1 million but £3 million. I certainly undertake to draw to my right hon. Friend's attention, as they say, my hon. Friend's plea on behalf of his local hospice.

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Mr. Speaker: Order. We have a busy day, but I shall allow questions to continue until 4.45 pm and then we will have to move on.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton): Has the Secretary of State noticed that fares in London and the south-east are due to rise by more than 8 per cent.? Why has he not taken that into account in setting the income support level? Does he realise that a five-day travel pass costs the equivalent of 35 per cent. of a single person's income support? Why does he not take that into account? Would he like to live on £28 a week for housing, poll tax, eating, heating and everything else?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman will realise that for many years it has been the practice to base upratings on the latest available information about what has happened to prices. That remains the sensible course. It is also worth making the point that it seems likely that, by next April, the rate of inflation will be lower than it is now.

Mr. Harry Ewing (Falkirk, East): May I press the point that was made by my hon. Friends the Members for Monklands, West (Mr. Clarke) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. McKelvey) on the residential care and nursing home allowance? Does the Secretary of State accept that more than 90 per cent. of beneficiaries will not receive that benefit? It will go straight to the owners of residential homes and will make no difference at all to the pocket money that beneficiaries receive. Has not the time come for a royal commission on the operation of residential homes and nursing homes? When highly paid professional football players in Scotland are told by their financial advisers that the best investment is in one of those residential homes, it is time to worry. I wonder whether the Secretary of State shares my view.

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government have made wide-ranging proposals, which are now building up towards implementation, to change the whole nature and basis of those arrangements in what

[Mr. Newton]

he and I would regard as a more sensible direction from April 1993. What I have announced today is an increase in the income support limits within the present structure. That, too, is sensible.

Mr. Tony Banks (Newham, North-West): How much money have the Government saved since the abolition of the single payment system? Is it not now running into hundreds of millions of pounds? Is not it grotesque that people who badly need loans are often judged as being unable to pay them back and so are refused? Is not that hypocrisy and injustice on the part of the Government?

Mr. Newton: The single payment system was unsustainable and had become increasingly open to abuse. Resources for the social fund have been substantially increased by what my right hon. Friend announced in August and what I am carrying through to next year.

Points of Order

4.47 pm

Mr. Martin M. Brandon-Bravo (Nottingham, South): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I have given you notice of my point of order, and I also conveyed my intention to the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen).

The ability of hon. Members to petition on behalf of their constituents is a treasured privilege. That privilege was abused last Friday, when the petition that was presented to you, Mr. Speaker, was based on a fraud. Signatures were fraudulently collected and sought to give credibility to that fraud. There never has been, there is not, nor is there going to be any likelihood of the Nottingham city hospital or the Queen's medical centre in my constituency being taken out of the national health service.

I will acknowledge that the form of the petition must have been correct, Mr. Speaker, or your office would not have accepted it. However, I ask whether it is possible for you to investigate how the other signatures were collected, for I believe that those people were unaware of what they were being asked to sign. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member is quite right. The petition was in order when it was presented to the Table Office, and the Table Office accepted it in good faith. It is not for me to judge its accuracy. I should call the hon. Member concerned.

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North): The signatures on the petition were collected by Alan Simpson, the next Labour Member for Nottingham, South, and myself. They came from thousands of people in Nottingham—health workers, doctors, nurses and patients—all of whom know that the Nottingham city hospital opted out last Wednesday. If it is of assistance to you, Mr. Speaker, I will read the full text of the petition. It states: "We"—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Allen: I am trying to be helpful.

Mr. Speaker: Not now. *[Interruption.]* Order. The petition was properly presented on Friday. It would have been open to the hon. Member to include a number of signatures on the hand-written top sheet of his petition. That did not happen. Nevertheless, as far as the Table Office was concerned, the petition was in the correct form.

Mr. David Ashby (Leicestershire, North-West): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. What are hon. Members supposed to do when petitions are put forward which are totally misleading and totally misrepresent the situation? We have even seen such a petition held up by the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen). He seems to be happy to have presented a misleading petition to the House. What are we to do in those circumstances?

Mr. Speaker: I cannot advise the hon. Member on tactics of that kind. I am concerned only with whether the petition was properly presented, and I have to say that it was.

Mr. Dick Douglas (Dunfermline, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I have a great deal of sympathy with you because of the onerous responsibilities facing you, especially as we approach the intense battle of a general election. However, may I prevail upon you, in the coming short recess, to examine your responsibilities in relation to the Representation of the People Acts? According to the motions on the Order Paper, today's debate will be an exclusively English debate on the health service—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] If that is indeed the case, we shall have no opportunity of raising the position in Scotland and the fact that the Secretary of State for Scotland and his Minister of State are at odds on the issue of hospital trusts in Scotland.

We cannot question a Scottish Office Minister today, and if I were to raise this matter with the Secretary of State for Health, he would say, "This is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland, and he will reply." May I have your assurance, Mr. Speaker, that in future, and especially in a general election or by-election period, you will seek to ensure that such debates are not dominated by Front-Bench speakers as happened during last Monday's defence debate when, although you asked for short speeches, the two Front Bench spokesmen consumed two hours—*[Interruption.]*

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Mr. Speaker: Order. We should get on with it. The debate is certainly not limited to England and Wales and I hope that, with any luck, when we get to it, I shall be able to call some Scottish Members.

Mr. Harry Ewing (Falkirk, East): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Well, what else?

Mr. Ewing: If you are to make the Representation of the People Acts your bedside reading during the short recess, perhaps you could consider the position of an hon. Member who is elected under one political banner but who then changes party—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: I am not certain that I shall be reading those Acts.

Mr. Douglas *rose*——

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am now pretty certain that those Acts will not be part of my bedside reading in the short recess.

National Health Service

Mr. Speaker: I must announce to the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition and that, because no fewer than 44 right hon. and hon. Members have already sought leave to speak in the debate and hope to be called. I therefore propose to put a limit of 10 minutes on speeches between 7 and 9 o'clock.

4.51 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. William Waldegrave): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the record extra resources provided for the NHS and the substantial increase in the number of NHS patients treated since the Government came to office in 1979; supports the Government's reforms of the NHS which are already bringing about improvements in patient care; deplores the intellectual bankruptcy of Her Majesty's Opposition which, bereft of any coherent proposals of its own for the modernisation of the National Health Service, is reduced to peddling smears and scares which lower morale amongst NHS staff and cause wholly unnecessary fear amongst patients; notes with approval the Prime Minister's unequivocal statement on the NHS that there will be no charges for hospital treatment, no charges for visits to the doctor, no privatisation of health care, neither in part nor as a whole, now or in the future; and welcomes his unequivocal assurance that Trust hospitals remain a permanent part of the NHS.

The Government have chosen to hold this debate today to show the House and the country three things. First, we intend to nail the falsehood that was put at the heart of Labour's campaigning ever since the notorious Monmouth by-election—that the Government intend to privatise health care in Britain and that NHS trusts are leaving the health service. Secondly, we intend to dissect and record for the House the increasingly desperate and contradictory shifts of line made by Labour over the past few weeks, as it has been forced to retreat from allegations which it knows to be false. Thirdly, we intend to demonstrate to the House what is already established among independent experts and commentators outside—that Labour has no serious policy for management of the health service and no position that stands up on money for health, and that it is our domination of the real agenda which has forced it to resort to a truly scurrilous campaign of smears and scares.

I will start by nailing once and for all the falsehood about privatisation. First, let us remember Labour's first version of that falsehood. It started with mendacious leaflets at Monmouth saying that the local trust hospital would be leaving the NHS. It went on with the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) saying that the Prime Minister would privatise health just like coal and steel. Then we had the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) saying, "We all know what the Tories do with nationalised industries, don't we? They privatise them," and the hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham saying, "They will finish up selling off hospitals and privatising the health service". *[Interruption.]*

Before Labour Members who are less well briefed start to cheer, I should point out that those were the allegations endorsed by the Leader of the Opposition's speech writers in Brighton, when their leader said:

> "The Tories will privatise the Health Service."

It was simple. It was straightforward. It was false. But that is not what Opposition Members are saying now. The trouble with accepting advice from the ragbag collection of

[Mr. William Waldegrave]

advisers who make up Labour's policy now is that it does not have to face interrogation from this House or from interviewers outside. Under those pressures, Labour has been redrafting and redefining—like the late Dr. Bowdler trying to rewrite Shakespeare without the naughty bits. We get six redefinitions a day; we get backing and filling; we get wriggling; and finally we get retreat.

It took six pages of the transcript of the hon. Member for Livingston's interview with Mr. Walden for that redoubtable interviewer to get to the truth. Mr. Walden said:

> "Ah, well, now it's becoming clearer to me, and how wise we were to have this discussion, because you are not saying, are you, that the Conservatives intend to sell off the public institution called the National Health Service to private interests?"

Then came the answer from the hon. Member for Livingston:

> "No".

So much for his leader, so much for the hon. Member for Copeland—wherever he is—who rejoices in the title of Labour's campaign co-ordinator; so much, for what it is worth, for the right hon. Member for Gorton—people always seem to be treading on him, poor fellow. The hon. Member for Livingston admits that the answer to the privatisation smears which his colleagues have perpetrated is "No". The hon. Gentleman should have the courage here and now to give the same clear, single-syllable answer to this House that he shared with Mr. Walden and the viewers. Why does he not just give us the same unequivocal "no" today?—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] I fear that the strings of the puppet have been pulled once again in a different direction.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): On the subject of that Walden programme and retreating, will the right hon. Gentleman explain why he found it necessary to say that the Government would stop making charges for fertility treatments at hospitals such as Bart's when a letter was sent to him on 19 August saying that that was illegal, but he did absolutely nothing about it? The right hon. Gentleman retreated only when Walden asked him that question. The truth about the right hon. Gentleman is that he is educated beyond his intelligence.

Mr. Waldegrave: There is no danger of that with the hon. Gentleman. His intervention enables me to say once again, and to make it as clear to the House as I made it on the "Walden" programme—and as clear as we have made it in the past and as clear as we will make it again in the future—that one cannot do that: it is illegal to charge NHS patients.

We all know how Labour has sought to back-track in the past few days.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Monklands, West) *rose*——

Mr. Waldegrave: No doubt we shall come to the hon. Gentleman in due course.

We know how Labour has sought to back-track in the past few days. We have privatisation replaced by creeping privatisation; we have creeping privatisation replaced by commercialisation, and falsehoods replaced by creeping falsehoods.

Let us examine some of the new definitions. One line is that having charges for some items of service in the NHS is privatisation. In that case, the very founder of the NHS invented privatisation. It was Aneurin Bevan who passed the legislation for prescription charges, and it was a Labour Government who introduced charges for teeth and spectacles.

There have always been some charges for some services in the NHS, under Labour and under the Conservatives. The proportion of the income of the service which comes from patient charges is actually lower now than it was in the 1950s. We did abolish universal free eye tests and dental check-ups and introduce charges for those able to pay—as is well known—and it was controversial at the time; just as Labour introduced the original charges for teeth and spectacles, and just as, in 1967, they reintroduced the prescription charge having rashly abolished it—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] There has been, and there will be, no fundamental shift away from a service financed overwhelmingly from taxation.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West) *rose*——

Mr. Waldegrave: If charging is to be the definition of privatisation, it was the hon. Gentleman's party who invented it. I give way to him.

Mr. Morgan: Although I did not see the programme, I understand that the Secretary of State said that it was illegal to charge for any health service except eye tests, prescriptions and those which he has just identified. If it is illegal, will he do something about the practice of one of the hospitals that serves my constituency of charging for nebulisers? It prescribes nebulisers, which are vital for people suffering from emphysema and acute bronchitis, and tells them——

Madam Deputy Speaker (Miss Betty Boothroyd): Order. The hon. Gentleman is making a speech, not an intervention. This is delaying the Secretary of State. I think that the Secretary of State has got the point.

Mr. Waldegrave: The position is entirely clear. NHS patients cannot be charged and will not be charged. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] I have answered the hon. Gentleman's question. NHS patients cannot be charged. *[Interruption.]* I have given the hon. Gentleman the absolutely clear answer that he asked for, and that is the truth.

Yet another redefinition comes from the Leader of the Opposition. Needless to say, his does not work either. In his version of the policy, he says:

> "Up to now, care for elderly people has been free."

This is an important matter. Like most of his pledges, it involves some billions of pounds of expenditure. Up to now, we have pursued a policy, supported by both sides of the House, called "Caring for People". The White Paper was supported by the right hon. Gentleman and the Labour party.

If the Leader of the Opposition is now saying that the transfer of people from wards in acute hospitals into the community, where they are supported by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security through the Department of Social Security, is to be abandoned by the Labour party, that is yet another commitment which involves billions of pounds of expenditure and will result in less good treatment for patients. The Labour party should come clean on that. Is it abandoning care in the community or not? If it is, that is an astonishing reversal, which would not only bring huge new pressures to bear on NHS hospitals but be worse for patients.

Then we come to the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms. Harman). Retreating off that ground, she has dug Labour into another hole. Privatisation as she defines it means high waiting lists. If that is so, Labour is the prince of privatisation. There has never been a Labour Government who did not leave waiting lists higher than they found them. What is more, as the hon. Member for Livingston knows full well, even if the hon. Member for Peckham does not, on a fair and comparable basis waiting lists fell between 1979 and now.

I give the figures for England. In March 1979, the number was 752,000. In March 1991, it was 693,000. I would like the hon. Member for Livingston to repudiate the briefing note that he has put round the country and which has been sent to me from a variety of places. It says that his figure of approximately 900,000 for now is for England, "excludes self-deferred cases"—so far, he is right —and

"includes waiting lists for day surgery, which were collected separately from 1987."

That is totally dishonest, because the truth of the matter is that the figures were not collected at all before 1987— not that they were collected separately. The hon. Gentleman is an honest man and he should repudiate that. He knows perfectly well that he gets his higher figure by including day patients, figures for whom were not collected before 1979. He should have the honesty to admit it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] We will not get any answer.

The next argument of the hon. Member for Peckham was that we were driving people into the private sector. [HON. MEMBERS: "You are."] Opposition Members should wait before they cheer. This one lands them in a hole as well, I am delighted to say. The single year when the largest rise in the percentage of the population covered by private insurance took place was 1979—a 28 per cent. increase. No one can doubt what caused that. It was caused by Confederation of Health Service Employees pickets controlling access to the cancer wards and by the total collapse of the service. In short, Labour's running of the health service was the best recruiter for private health care that there has ever been.

Big falsehood, little falsehood, creeping smears, smears that bellow in the tones of the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) or in the dulcet tones of the hon. Member for Livingston: in the past two weeks we have nailed them all. Labour took its campaign a smear too far and it knows it. It was the politics of hit and run, and the House will not let Labour Members get away with it.

Meanwhile, at Langbaurgh, the two candidates for the main Opposition parties have been following their leaders into total confusion. First, the Labour candidate. Labour's candidate in the by-election is repeating the tired and false old allegations about trust hospitals leaving the NHS. I am also told that that is not his only error. It seems that, in his election literature, he lists two hospitals as part of the new South Cleveland trust. In fact, there are three. It is a pity that his slogan is:

"It's time to make Langbaurgh count".

Then there is the unfortunate Liberal. He has joined in with a finely printed leaflet. He was selected, the hon. Member for Bolsover may be interested to know, for his local knowledge. He has led a great campaign on the closure of the maternity unit in Gainsborough. He is not going to have the closure of the maternity unit in Gainsborough. Unfortunately, Gainsborough is in the next county—it is Guisborough. I am afraid that the candidate is a little askew.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark and Bermondsey): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, because I was in Guisborough maternity hospital this morning. *[Interruption.]* If the Tory candidate thinks that dealing with a printer's error which was accepted as such is a way to win a campaign, he has something else coming. I want to ask the question put to people who go to the maternity hospital, and I hope that the Secretary of State will answer it. Why do not his Government commit the resources sufficient to make sure that the NHS has the money that it needs—[HON. MEMBERS: "How much?"] I will tell Conservative Members how much—to keep pace with NHS inflation, which is above the average inflation? Why do the public expenditure plans of his Government show that the figures for the next two years are net increases of 1·2 per cent.—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have already made it clear that interventions should be interventions. They should be specific questions or comments which are to the point. It is unfair of hon. Members to seek to jump the queue in this way. I tell the hon. Member and any other hon. Members who want to intervene that I want specific questions from now on. Come on Mr. Hughes, get it over with.

Mr. Hughes: Why are the commitments in the public expenditure plans 1·2 per cent. and 0·65 per cent. for the next two years—well below the least estimate of what the NHS needs to stand still?

Mr. Waldegrave: The hon. Gentleman is suffering from what is known as post-candidate selection depression. These matters will be dealt with when the autumn statement comes out. The hon. Gentleman was honourably trying to dig his candidate out of the absurd hole into which he had fallen head first, and I pay tribute to him for that.

Mr. Tim Devlin (Stockton, South): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend is aware that the position is in fact rather worse than he fears? When the Labour candidate in Langbaurgh was asked to explain why he thought that there were two hospitals in the trust instead of three, he said, "Ah yes, that is because only two of them are in the constituency." That makes it rather worse, because none of the three hospitals in the trust is in the constituency.

Mr. Waldegrave: Neither of the Opposition parties has been very lucky with its candidate in this particular election campaign.

The reason why the Labour party took off into the smears and scares was because of the third point, to which I am coming.

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Mr. Waldegrave: Hon. Members will doubtless make their speeches in due course.

Mr. Tom Clarke: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will recall that, 20 minutes ago, the Secretary of State said that he would give way to me. Is it in order for the Secretary of State for Health in England,

[Mr. Tom Clarke]

who made statements on television yesterday about the health service in Scotland, to refuse to give way to a Scottish Member?

Madam Deputy Speaker: So far there has been no breach of Standing Orders. The Secretary of State will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Mr. Waldegrave: The reason why Labour Members went down the side track of smears and scares was because of the drubbing that they had been receiving at the hands of the experts on their policies, such as they are. Seldom has there been such a consensus among health experts—generally an argumentative lot—than there is now on the fact that Labour's positive policy on health has been an object of almost universal derision.

Ken Judge, the director of the much respected King's Fund Institute, said:

> "One of the key difficulties"—

key difficulties, mind you, not one of the lesser difficulties—

> "with Labour's health policy is that it is not at all clear precisely what their policy for running the system is."

Pamela Charlwood, director of the Institute of Health Services Management, called Labour's plans to replace the purchaser-provider division with health authorities divided into two boards as "an unworkable mess". Professor Alan Maynard of York university asked of Labour's absurd flexi-funding scheme:

> "Where is this extra money coming from? Are there going to be closures and sackings? How do they identify successful authorities? They haven't thought it through."

Dr. David Hunter, director of the Nuffield Institute, who, incidentally, has been trying to help Labour Members in one of their think tanks, said:

> "Labour plans have not been worked through in detail. They are not convincing. They would create further turmoil and uncertainty."

Yesterday he added that he feared that under Labour the NHS would not be "modernised", it would be "fossilised."

That is why there is not a single serious editorial or other commentator who takes Labour seriously on its policy. *The Observer's* political diarist, not in his comments a particular friend of mine, described the policy of the hon. Member for Livingston thus:

> "He does not possess a single new idea for organisation of the Health Service. His one notion is to throw more money at it in carefully unspecified amounts."

At this rate I must warn the hon. Gentleman that it will not be long before he is attacked by the *Daily Mirror*. After all, Labour Members have not had long. They have had only 12 years. Perhaps in another 12 years they will have a policy. We shall see that they get the time.

Then there is money. Labour Members are not very good at money. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Livingston in one respect. He shares his favours equally; having spent last Sunday going backwards on the Walden show, he spent this Sunday going backwards on the Dimbleby show. There was the truly comical spectacle of him trying to make sense, either to himself or to Mr. Dimbleby, of his flexi-budget. It became crystal clear that, if such a scheme were ever to be introduced into NHS management, it would be a recipe for chaos. Every hospital would be encouraged to compete for incentive funds, and only the winners would be rewarded. The others would go bust. Mr. Dimbleby could not take it seriously. What was apparent also was that neither could the hon. Member for Livingston.

Far more fundamental was the hon. Member's further shifting of the ground on money. He could not define what he meant by underfunding, and he abandoned his clear previous pledge to abolish it, whatever it might be, over the lifetime of a Parliament. In passing, he had a snipe at the hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett) who had made it clear that only some of the alleged underfunding, whatever it might be, could be put right in a Parliament. He told her that she should not give interviews. It was a truly magnificent piece of the equivocation for which the hon. Gentleman is becoming increasingly known.

I shall tell you, Mr. Speaker, what the hon. Gentleman's formulations on spending were on Mr. Dimbleby's show. I noted them down. They started with something that almost means something:

> "We have made a firm commitment, and I am very happy to repeat the firm commitment, that we will over the lifetime of the next Parliament—it cannot be done overnight—we will restore the underfunding of the NHS of the past decade."

That was in January. Yesterday it became first, "We will", then, "We very much hope" and finally, "We will seek" —the ultimate weasel word. The hon. Gentleman will seek and he will not find.

When cornered this time, the hon. Gentleman did not take refuge behind the right hon. and learned Member for Monklands, East (Mr. Smith), his usual shelter from the stormy blast. He called in aid in a voice of awe the "ultimate authority". By that he meant—I am afraid I am not joking—"our leader, Mr. Kinnock". The latter, however—he is sitting smiling in his usual benign and somewhat vacuous way—had already involved himself in quite another pledge, involving £3 billion to £4 billion of different money.

The hon. Member for Livingston referred to such promises as "interesting contributions", "persuasive" and "a very serious figure". Finally, he said:

> "I am not in a position to differ from them, but equally I am not in a position to validate"

them. As a recent leader in *The Times* said of Labour:

> "Their undefined 'restoration of underfunding' is designed to permit everybody, from consultants to porters, to think that Santa Claus is round the corner. They remain as ever, a gigantic soft touch."

Mr. Tom Clarke *rose*——

Mr. Waldegrave: I must let the hon. Gentleman out of his agony. Come along.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for finally giving way. He is making it more difficult for me than Brian Walden did for him yesterday. When the Secretary of State was asked a specific question about charges in Scotland, including charges for HIV patients, and he gave the reply which led many of us to believe that those charges would be annulled, had he consulted his fellow Ministers at the Scottish Office? If not, has he now done so? If there have been consultations, when will the charges be withdrawn?

Mr. Waldegrave: There is no need to consult about what the law of the land is, and that is the end of that matter. *[Interruption.]* There is no lack of clarity about it whatever. NHS patients cannot be charged.

It is not just that Labour Members cannot substantiate the half-promises on resources that they have made. It is worse than that. On a range of issues, they have made unequivocal promises to reverse savings that we have made, the benefits of which we have already ploughed back into patient care. They would end, for example, the contracting out of services, which has gained us a minimum of, and probably much more than, £50 million for spending on patients.

Yesterday, the hon. Member for Livingston pledged an additional £400 million to £500 million, which would be taken from patient spending and would finance Labour's absurd minimum wage plans in the NHS. I am grateful for his unusual candour, in that he said £400 million to £500 million. He continued in a totally absurd passage to say that that would be "largely self-financing" because he would take all the money away again in tax. I believe that the hon. Gentleman may have let some small cat out of the bag about what would happen to the taxation rates of the low paid. What else can "largely self-financing" mean?

Let us get this clear: Labour is already pledged under its national insurance and tax proposals to take £20 a week from the average nurse and £70 a week from the average general practitioner. The House should be told today whether it is now pledging to reverse those cuts in take-home pay for health service workers, gross or not. If it is not, all those health service workers know that, if the Labour party is elected, they will lose in real terms, as they did under the last Labour Government. We will not get the answer to that, any more than we will get an answer to anything else from them.

The Opposition made another utterly disastrous pledge yesterday. They have promised to launch the health service down the route that Barbara Castle launched it down in the 1970s. That promise comes from the otherwise normally thought of as the oh, so responsible right hon. and learned Member for Monklands, East. Yesterday, he made it clear on yet another television show that the Labour party intended to remove pay beds from the NHS. That will take another £100 million.

That money will be lost to the NHS and given to the largely French and American-owned private sector health companies—those companies that Lord Ennals and others direct in Scotland and elsewhere. Why should the NHS not have the opportunity to make that money for patients? It could plough that money back into the system for NHS patients. Why should it be forced to lose that money? That is what Barbara Castle attempted to do and that is what brought her into total conflict not only with the British Medical Association, but with the entire health service.

Barbara Castle is an honest lady, and she wrote down in her diary the reason for the policy—the hon. Member for Bolsover knows this very well, as he reads those diaries every evening. She wrote:

"doesn't the Government; realise"—

the then Labour Government; Ted Short was giving her some trouble on this rather absurd policy—

"that this is an essential political sweetener for the Unions?".

That is what generated the Labour Government's apology for a policy then, and that is what generates the Opposition's apology for a policy now.

Throughout the world, Governments of all political persuasions are seeking with greater urgency to match scarce resources with the increasing demand for health care. In Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and New Zealand, the ideas that we are carrying through into practice have been paralleled, or indeed, in some cases, imitated, by other Governments.

It is right to devolve decision taking, as we are doing, to NHS trusts and to general practice fund holders. It is right to enable comparison of costs to be made by those who have to judge where to put resources. It is right to reward with more resources, so that they can do more work, those who are the most efficient at delivering high-quality health care. That is what our internal market is now beginning to do.

It is right also to raise the total level of resource to meet new needs, as we have done. At a time when other countries are seeking to rein back spending on health, we have been increasing the share of the gross domestic product that goes to the health service. In the past 10 years, there has been a full percentage point increase in spending from a bigger national product.

It is fear of those facts and of the void of their own policy that has led the Opposition to smear and to mislead. But it is not too late even now. Even at this late stage, the hon. Member for Livingston could redeem himself today before the House by setting out in paragraphs preferably a little shorter than those he used on the "Walden" programme three simple things. First, he should say that he knows the privatisation smear to be false. Let him say that and use that "no" as he did on the Walden programme. Secondly, what are his plans for the management of the health service? Let us hear about them at last. Thirdly, how much money is he going to spend? Let him say those three things to the House today. He has had 12 years: we might at least have some answers finally.

We could hardly have had a clearer example again today of the shiftiness of the Labour party on this issue. Our policy is clear. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said—I repeat his words in the House today—

"There will be no charges for hospital treatment, no charges for visits to the doctor, no privatisation of health care, neither piecemeal or in part, nor as a whole. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not after the next election. Not ever while I am Prime Minister."

That is what my right hon. Friend said, and that is the truth. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

What we have achieved on spending and what we intend on policy is crystal clear. It is underpinned by clear commitments in the pledges and principles that are placed before the House today. That is why I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to reject the amendment and to support the motion.

5.24 pm

Mr. Robin Cook (Livingston): I beg to move, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof,

'deplores the decision of Her Majesty's Government to ignore the evidence from the consultation period that the overwhelming opinion of the local public and health staff was opposed to the commercialisation of their health service by further units opting out of the local health service; condemns as irresponsible the approval of further trust applications in the face of the widespread financial difficulties experienced by existing trusts with their original business plans; rejects the relentless privatisation of health services by the construction of more private wings, the transfer of geriatric care to nursing homes, the increased introduction of private contractors, the decline in access to a National Health Service dental service, and the introduction of tax relief on private medicine; notes with alarm the spreading practice of charges for hospital services and the damage done to eye screening by the introduction of commercial charges for eye tests; regrets the persistent refusal of Her Majesty's Government to recognise the self-evident underfunding of the hospital service and rejects the priority attached by Her Majesty's Government to

[Mr. Robin Cook]

cutting taxes rather than restoring cuts in public services; and commends Labour's policy document "A Fresh Start for Health" as the comprehensive basis for renewing a public health service over the lifetime of a full Labour Government.'.

The 900,000 people on the waiting lists in Britain and the 300,000 people who had their operations cancelled in the past 12 months would all regard the speech that we have just heard as wholly irrelevant to why they cannot get the health care that they need.

Mr. Peter Thurnham (Bolton, North-East) *rose*——

Mr. Cook: With respect, it is not the form to intervene within the first 30 seconds of a speech.

The Secretary of State accused me of retreating on my statement. If I was so minded to retreat on anything I have said, I could not hope to rival the speed with which he moved in retreating on tax relief only yesterday. I apologise to the Secretary of State for one thing; we drafted our amendment before his revelation on the Walden programme. Had we known about that before, we would have wished to include in it the right hon. Gentleman's cheerful confession that tax relief for private medical insurance did not work very well, that not many people had taken it up and that they might as well abolish it. All we need to complete the act of repentance is a letter from the right hon. Member for Finchley (Mrs. Thatcher) to say that she was

"only too painfully aware that I was responsible",

and was "mystified" that it was such a flop.

Six months ago, at the start of a previous debate, I told the House that the scheme for private medical insurance, far from working well, was not working at all. Far from resulting in more elderly people choosing private medical insurance, all the scheme has done is provide tax handouts for people with existing policies—a tax handout at a total cost of £150 million over three years. That money would have been far better spent on the geriatric wards that the Government are closing.

That daft scheme came out of the same review that gave us the dogmatic changes to the NHS that the Government are now imposing. It was the first proposal in their White Paper to be implemented; now it is the first to be abandoned.

After that experience, one might have thought that a touch of humility would have been appropriate among those on the Treasury Bench—possibly a passing cloud of self-doubt. Not a bit of it. Never mind the fact that the one part of their policy of which we have had two years of experience has turned out not to work very well, the Secretary of State has chosen to kick on regardless.

Last week, the right hon. Gentleman put another 99 units into his giant experiment with the health service when he made them self-governing trusts, but there is plenty of evidence that those trusts are not working very well. Central Manchester is in deficit of more than £1 million, interestingly almost half of it caused by losses on its new private wing. It is a bit like the tax relief on private medical insurance—not many people wanted to take up that option. The people of Manchester, had they been asked, would have preferred that money to be invested in national health facilities rather than in a private wing.

The Bradford trust has given us another new first in businesslike methods. At the weekend, Bradford announced, for the first time in its history, compulsory redundancies of nursing staff. Mind you, the director of nursing could not bring himself to use the term "compulsory redundancy": he described the nurses as being "released". They were released because the ward in which they worked, which currently treats 34 patients a week, is to be closed next month.

In search of the common ground, let us put to one side the argument between the Opposition and the Government about whether one can close beds and increase patient care at the same time. I concede that nursing staff and others have been extremely inventive in coping with bed closures, even down to inventing "hot bedding" by which day cases occupy the beds in which in-patients sleep at night. However, I hope that Conservative Members will not now pretend that one can reduce the number of qualified nurses and increase patient numbers without the quality of care suffering. Yet the Library advises me that the next statistical bulletin will say that, in the past year, 3,000 fewer nurses have been employed in the health service, at the very time when the Government have increased the number of administrators by 4,000.

The subject of administrators logically brings me to Guy's hospital, where we find the best paid health administrators. Guy's currently spends more in its business budget for the current year and is receiving less in revenue than it expected in the current budget. Estimates of how much less revenue it is receiving are subject to a wide margin of error. In the case of work outwith the main block contracts, the estimates of how much has gone unpaid vary from an official figure of 50 per cent. unpaid to an unofficial figure of 95·5 per cent. Guy's response has been another business first for the NHS: it has sent packing its director of finance, with a farewell deal of £200,000 plus his BMW car. Is that what the Secretary of State meant when he promised to bring modern business practices to the NHS? Where is the value for money for patients in that?

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Before the hon. Gentleman knocks management and administration too much, will he comment on the fact that some 3 per cent. of NHS employees are managers, whereas Britain's biggest manufacturing industry has over 20 per cent?

Mr. Cook: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman's question goes to the heart of why we resist the Government's changes. The kind of market that they propose cannot be run without a much larger army of administrators than any business ever has. If the hon. Gentleman wants to compare the NHS with the private medical sector, never mind private industry, he will find that the administration in the NHS is half the level of the private medical sector. Why, then, should we copy their methods? Surely they should copy ours.

We know that the Secretary of State recognises those problems. He has not managed to muster the same candour as he did in relation to tax relief, but he has kicked into touch the other applications for trust status in London. Instead, we are to have a committee of inquiry for London. It is more than a year since I published a leaked document from his Department warning Ministers —admittedly, his predecessor—of the consequences of a market for the London health service. It warned that the consequence would be "unplanned downsizing", and that at least one major hospital would be put at risk. However, the Secretary of State's predecessor did not listen: he simply ploughed ahead. The Secretary of State even allowed Guy's to become a trust, although we now know that it had the worst of six ratings for financial viability from his independent advisers.

A year later, nine out of the 12 London teaching hospitals are in deficit. Some of them are contemplating severe downsizing. In the fix that the Secretary of State got into, he was absolutely right to appoint a committee of inquiry, but it was absolutely wrong for him to go ahead with his risky experiment without having a committee of inquiry at the beginning.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Mid-Kent): Will the hon. Gentleman explain why, with a rapidly falling population, London should be so grossly over-hospitalised, while areas like mine have been deprived of much-needed resources for many years because of the concentration of resources in London?

Mr. Cook: Let us take the logic of the hon. Gentleman's question. He says that London is over-hospitalised and there is over-capacity. One could challenge that statement, but let us accept the premise of the question. If there were surplus capacity, surely competition in a health market would work. Surely this would be the one place where there would be a buyer's market and where practices could drive a hard bargain on behalf of the patients. If the Government really believe in the market, why have they now had to admit that the only way to run a public service is by proper, sensible public planning?

If the Government have decided that, in this case, where they have surplus capacity, they cannot run a market in which there is competition, why are they promoting a market in health care without the benefit of a committee of inquiry in places such as Aberdeen, where the only hospital for 15 miles in any of three directions is a hospital that is applying to become a trust? Where is the competition in that? What conceivable gain can be achieved by creating a market for that one hospital? Consultation on the application for that trust for Forresterhill hospital closed in the same week as the by-election in Kincardine and Deeside started.

Were the Secretary of State a resident of my home town of Aberdeen and a voter in Kincardine and Deeside, he would have some difficulty when he went to the polling booth for the by-election and sucked his pen, because every candidate in the by-election is opposed to his policy. I cannot tell the House the results of the by-election but I can give the results of the consultation on the application for trust status for Forresterhill hospital. A total of 3,919 responses were received; 13 were in favour of the application for trust status; and almost 3,900 recorded opposition to the trust. How can there be any doubt about the response to that consultation? How can anyone pretend that consultation would be anything but a sham if the Government even contemplated approving it? How can the Government seriously hope to fight a by-election——

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher): Answer the questions.

Mr. Cook: If Conservative Members want questions, they should answer this question before that by-election: what will the Government do for Forresterhill hospital, and will they make it opt out once polling day is out of the way? Moreover, since Conservative Members are so keen on questions, let me ask another question that we asked last week and to which we are still awaiting an answer.

Mr. Roger Gale (Thanet, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: No. Conservative Members wanted questions and we shall give them questions. Does it never cross their minds that, when the public are so opposed to a proposal, it is just possible that the public are right? The public are right to believe that they would get better health care if an integrated public service was retained rather than broken up into competing businesses.

This morning, the Secretary of State said that he did not understand what we meant by "commercialisation". Let me try to help. Last summer, I asked for the business plans of hospitals seeking to become trusts in this round. Three out of four refused. Interestingly, the most common reason for refusing——

Mr. Phillip Oppenheim (Amber Valley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I can never refuse the hon. Gentleman. I shall give way when I have finished this passage.

Mr. Waldegrave: The hon. Gentleman has gone off, in his usual way into past speeches. Will he answer the questions that I asked him? He gave no answer whatsoever to the three questions that I put to him. Will he now honour the House with his confidence and give those three answers?

Mr. Cook: If the Secretary of State is patient, he will get to those passages and he will have some answers. I do not promise that he will like the answers, but he will certainly get some.

First, may I help the Secretary of State on the term "commercialisation"? The most common reason given by those hospitals that refused to release their business plans was that the information that they contained would be of value to a commercial competitor.

Mr. Jerry Hayes (Harlow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: No. I have already made a promise.

We have already damaged the health service. If, even before those hospitals become trusts, they no longer regard other hospitals as partners in the same public service but as commercial competitors——

Mr. Oppenheim: As I know that the hon. Gentleman will have carefully costed the Labour party's proposals for the NHS, will he say by exactly how much he believes the NHS to be underfunded? Will it be the priority of a future Labour Government—should one come to power—to redress that underfunding?

Mr. Cook: Yes, it will be a priority of the next Labour Government. The Labour party's Front Bench team all understand that that will be one of the key ways in which the next Labour Government will be tested.

Mr. Waldegrave: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I shall happily give way to the Secretary of State, but I am still replying to his hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Mr. Oppenheim).

Mr. Waldegrave: For the aid of the *Hansard* writers, we heard the hon. Gentleman say "a priority". Will he now say, among all the other priorities, how much would be spent?

Mr. Cook: Both those questions are now of such antiquity that we should send them for carbon dating. Let me respond—*[Interruption.]* There is not much point in Conservative Members asking questions if they will not listen to answers.

I shall respond by stating quite plainly what we have said on funding. First, each year we shall ensure that, if we approve a pay award in the health service, we shall fully fund it in a way that the Government have never done since 1985. Secondly, when we produce our budget for the national health service, we shall fully take into account the pressures on the budget of the growing numbers of the very elderly in our community—the very people who created the NHS and who, cruelly, now find that they cannot use it when they need it. Thirdly, in the first year we shall start to tackle underfunding and shall continue to do so year on year.

Mr. Hayes: The hon. Gentleman really must come clean. Thousands of people saw him on the Jonathan Dimbleby progamme yesterday and saw Mr. Dimbleby ask the hon. Gentleman about the £4 billion of underfunding that the Leader of the Opposition talks about and the £6 billion underfunding that the British Medical Association talks about. The hon. Gentleman replied that he was not in a position to validate the estimates. How can anyone believe him?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman and I had the same exchange during the last debate, in which the hon. Gentleman accused me of not being serious because I said that it could not be done overnight. Having watched the Conservative party conference I understand that, for the hon. Gentleman, "overnight" is rather a long time. Nevertheless, the position remains precisely the same; over the lifetime of the Parliament, we shall seek to restore the underfunding, and in each year we shall make progress towards achieving that end. In precisely—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is a most serious debate. Millions of people outside the House, as well as those inside it, are listening to the debate, so let us have it conducted in good order so it might be properly recorded so that they may understand it.

Mr. Cook: We shall do it next time because we did it last time. The last Labour Government——

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Mr. Cook: Conservative Members will have to listen to the facts now.

Inside five years, the last Labour Government provided more extra nurses and doctors for the NHS than the Government have done in more than 10 years. Every year, we increased the real resources to the health service by twice the amount that the Government have done. If Conservative Members are seriously going to contend that the——

Dr. Keith Hampson (Leeds, North-West): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. There was a gross inaccuracy in the hon. Gentleman's statement. The only time during the past 20 years when there was a real cut in NHS spending was in 1977.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That was not a point of order at all.

Mr. Cook: If Conservative Members are seriously going to contend that there is no underfunding of the health service, as appears to be the basis of their chant, let them try to tell that to Maria Mullhall. Let the Secretary of State try telling her about equal access to free health care. Last year, her father's heart operation was cancelled. This year, her father had a second heart attack.

Mr. Gale: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Cook: I can understand why Conservative Members do not want to hear this.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I shall take the point of order, which I hope is genuine.

Mr. Gale: Madam Deputy Speaker, a few moments ago I distinctly heard you say to Conservative Members that thousands of people outside the House were waiting to hear the answer to a question. Could you instruct the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) to give it?

Mr. Cook: I can understand why Conservative Members do not want to hear about the real effect of their policies on real people. As the House well knows, the people outside the Chamber know the reality of what is going on in the health service, and they want to hear that reality expressed from the Opposition Dispatch Box during this debate. Conservative Members will not be allowed to silence that.

Maria Mullhall's father suffered a heart attack this year, having had his heart operation cancelled last year.

Mr. Ian Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is wriggling.

Mr. Cook: I am not wriggling. Conservative Members do not want to hear what is happening in the health service under their Administration.

Maria Mullhall rang 999 for an ambulance.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You reminded the House that the public would be watching this debate——

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I reminded the House that millions of people outside the House take this matter seriously, and the House should do likewise. We must hear this debate in the good order that this debating Chamber demands. I call Mr. Cook.

Mr. Nicholls: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have heard the hon. Gentleman's point of order and he must now resume his seat. I call Mr. Cook.

Mr. Cook: I very much hope that Maria Mullhall is one of those watching this debate, because she will see the depth of concern being expressed. When she rang for the ambulance, for 15 minutes she was connected to an answering machine asking her to hold. Her father died while she was connected to that answering machine. When asked to comment on the matter, a spokesman for the ambulance service said that the answering machine was used "when demand is excessive".

How is it possible for a fatal heart attack to be described as an excessive demand? How can Conservative Members go on denying that there is underfunding when the system cannot handle an emergency call for a heart attack? There were no answering machines under Labour.

Mr. Waldegrave: May I remind the hon. Gentleman what happened to the emergency services when the Labour party was last in power? The Confederation of Health Service Employees was controlling access to hospitals and the ambulances could not get into the hospitals.

Mr. Cook: One of the reasons why people outside this House find it impossible to trust this Government's commitment to the health service is the open contempt with which they talk about most of the people who work in the service. One thinks of the contempt with which the Secretary of State quoted the Confederation of Health Service Employees at the Conservative party conference. He quoted the general secretary of COHSE as demanding that his members should

"push for a health service that acts in the interests of its staff".

The Secretary of State got his applause at the party conference. It is a pity that he did not read what the general secretary of COHSE had actually written. He had called on his members

"to push for a health service that acts in the interests of its staff and the people who rely on it."

What word can we use to describe that deliberate misquotation? What word will the Under-Secretary find in his well-thumbed Collins dictionary to describe it? How dare they accuse us of lying?

Maria Mulhall's experience was not unique. Dr. Michael Joy, a GP in Surrey, has done an analysis of his heart patients over the past 10 years and found that, in that period, 15 of them died on waiting lists for operations. None of them died while waiting for private operations.

It is difficult to do justice to the fury of the patients who write to us after being told that they will have to wait for more than a year for their operations and after learning that, if they had the money, they could have the same operation with the same surgeon in the same hospital in little more than a week. Patients call it privatisation when they see more private wings in NHS hospitals providing a fast track for patients who can pay. In Doncaster, the wards closed by the trust hospital are being reopened by an American private hospital company. In Newark, the proposal before the health authority is for 50 acute NHS beds and 50 private sector beds at a hospital designed from the start to have a first-class and a second-class compartment.

Patients call it privatisation when they find that geriatric wards are closed and patients are put in private nursing homes. How would Conservative Members who are seeking to intervene in this debate respond to the moving letter that appeared in a national newspaper last week from a man whose wife was admitted to hospital with terminal cancer and who described how his distress in her last months was increased by pressure to get her out of the NHS hospital and into a private nursing home? That took place in a hospital with 60 closed geriatric beds standing empty—a hospital that found the money and the land to build a private wing for private patients. I can tell Conservative Members what this gentleman calls that. He says:

"Not only is a form of privatisation taking place, it can be seen and it can also be experienced."

Mrs. Edwina Currie (Derbyshire, South): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify what he has just said? Is it now Labour party policy to nationalise all the hundreds and thousands of first-class private residential care homes and nursing homes throughout the country and to put their occupants back, 30 or 40 to a ward, into NHS geriatric wards?

Mr. Cook: Of course that is not our policy. Our policy —this should be the duty of any Government charged with the management of the NHS—is to make sure that those patients have a choice between public and private sectors, and that they are not confronted with a private sector monopoly.

Patients call it privatisation when they discover that the dentist will treat them only if they go private. The day the Prime Minister made his speech on not privatising the health service, patients at a practice in Devon received a letter from their dentist telling them:

"As from January 1992 we shall no longer be able to offer NHS treatment to our fee-paying adult patients."

The contrast between what the Prime Minister said and what they were told was so stark that three separate patients of the practice in question sent me the letter, saying:

"It surely is privatisation by the back door."

Patients call it privatisation when they discover that they have to pay for what used to be free. I was extremely interested to hear the Secretary of State say yesterday that it was illegal to charge NHS patients. I was sorry to learn from this morning's papers, however, that, when asked, his Department could not find a single case in which he had intervened to stop such charging.

Scarborough health authority has sent a letter to those who used to receive incontinence aids:

"You will be aware that, in a modern"——

Mr. Ivan Lawrence (Burton): Nonsense.

Mr. Cook: In that case, it is nonsense from health authorities acting under a Conservative Government.

"You will be aware that, in a modern NHS, each health authority has to look carefully at costs and expenditure. After careful thought I have therefore decided that the free supply of incontinence aids can no longer be sustained."

So patients on income support find that they are being charged for incontinence aids that once were free.

What will the Secretary of State do about Bart's, where this morning it was discovered that some patients coming for fertility treatment are being asked to pay £350 of the £800 cost? Will the right hon. Gentleman stop that after this debate? What will he say to the woman in Ipswich who wrote to me because 12 years ago she injured her spine and was given a free appliance to help with the pain? She finds that this month she will have to pay £70 to replace the appliance. What will he say to this woman of 72, so poor that even under the present rules she qualifies for housing benefit? She says:

"Yes, it is creeping privatisation of the NHS".

These are not our words: they are the words of the patients who know what is happening. Are they too lying when they describe what happens to them?

Mr. Devlin: Perhaps we could move a little further north, from Scarborough to Langbaurgh, where on

[Mr. Devlin]

Thursday the Labour candidate said that hospitals that opt for self-governing status opt out of the national health service. On the same day, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell) said in the *Evening Gazette* that hospitals that become trusts remain part of the NHS. As the hon. Member for Middlesbrough is sitting in front of the Langbaurgh candidate's friend, perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to introduce them?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman clearly came here with instructions to get his sound bite in for the local press. I was foolish enough to imagine that he was going to say something relevant to the debate—but I think it time that we made progress. People who find that their health service treatment is slipping away from under them will remember the total indifference that the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Devlin) showed on this point.

We shall not let the Secretary of State come back to this House after what he has said about charges being illegal without hearing whether, after this debate, he left the Chamber and stopped those charges.

Quite properly, Madam Deputy Speaker, you do not allow us to use the word "lie" of each other in this House, but the rules do not prevent me from reporting that the word has been used against me time and again in the past three weeks—although not in this Chamber. It has not been used to my face, when I am in a studio—it is always said when I am not there to answer back. No one has raised the charge more often than the Secretary of State, whose routine response to criticism now is to brand it a lie.

The reason for the Chamber not allowing the use of the word "lie" is well-founded: it is that we cheapen and degrade public debate when we reduce it to the level of personal abuse. The politician who forgets those rules will pay a high price. It is a price that is exacted by a public who will treat with contempt any politician who would rather abuse his opponent than answer the charges. After a fortnight of abuse by Conservative Members, the voice of the nation was heard last weekend, in a poll which gave health as the largest single reason why people would not vote for this Government.

The Secretary of State had some fun at the expense of our policies. He has clearly been through our document "Fresh Start for Health". It is the fullest, longest, most comprehensive health document ever produced by an Opposition. Before coming to the debate, I went to the Oriel room and requested the documents that the Conservative party produced on health policy before the 1979 election. I was told that none could be found.

So that the Secretary of State has no doubt about our policies and why the public prefer them, I shall tell the House what our policies are. First, we shall rebuild the NHS as a public service and bring back into the local health service those hospitals that have gone it alone as trusts. We shall not bring them back into health authorities that represent just the Secretary of State of the day, but into health authorities that represent local communities. We shall set each of them a performance agreement which will tackle the variation in performance which Conservative Members keep identifying and never tackle.

We shall offer pressure and incentives to improve the performance of health authorities that are failing in public service while Conservative Members offer only the risk of downsizing and closure in a health market. We call our document "Fresh Start for Health" because Conservatives have imposed on the health service a wrong agenda with the wrong priorities. That was plainly demonstrated last year, when the Government discovered that they could not afford their changes to the national health service and to community care and therefore chose to plough ahead with their unpopular changes to the NHS but to delay changes in community care until 1993.

It is not care in the community to take patients out of a geriatric ward and put them in a private nursing home. That is simply transfer from a public institution to a private institution. Real care in the community is provided by those local authorities which supply the home help service, the authorities that are in the top 20 in the league of home help provision—every single one of them a Labour authority. That is why we shall introduce a community care grant to support the work of those local authorities. We shall ring-fence that grant to make sure that the bottom 20 authorities, none of which are Labour, have to spend that money on the care of the elderly.

We shall create a level playing field in residential care to end the nonsense by which the biggest subsidy from central Government goes not into public residential care but into private residential care. We shall take the action that the Government have failed to take to make a reality of their targets in health promotion, such as banning tobacco advertising to stop pressure on young people to take up the habit and bringing in random breath testing to stop alcohol abuse. We shall undo the criminal damage that the Government did to the screening service when they introduced charges for eye tests. We shall restore the free eye test so that no one will have to go without an eye test because he cannot afford it.

We shall plug the biggest gap in the Government's list of health targets by introducing targets to reduce inequalities in health between income levels. Conservatives cannot do that, because they have spent a decade levering open inequalities in income and cannot now admit that they have also widened inequalities in health. We can improve matters, because we understand that people who are poor will suffer from poor health. We know that, when people are unemployed and cannot afford decent food, their children will grow up stunted; that, if pensioners cannot afford to heat their homes, they are more likely to die in winter.

We recognise poverty as a health issue, which is one of the reasons for our intention to end poverty wages through a minimum wage. We cannot stomach the double standards of an Administration who tell us that £3·40 is not too much for a prescription charge but is far too much to ask as a minimum wage for an hour's work. We shall do these things because we believe in policies that would enable us to live in a society that would rather invest in a modern health service than take tax cuts and run.

People outside also want to live in that society. They want the health policies that recognise that we can get better protection for everybody if we all work together to build a public health service that defends everybody rather than one that tries to protect private individuals. That is why health is now one of the largest of the major issues registered in all the opinion polls. It is also why health is now the largest single reason why people are so anxious to sweep this Government out of the way.

6.6 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): At the start of his speech, the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) dealt with waiting lists and patient care. I agree that those issues are the test, but he should remember what happened when Labour was in power and was able to implement some of its policies. Under Labour, nurses' pay did not increase, it fell behind. The hon. Gentleman spoke about rebuilding the national health service, but when Labour was in government capital spending fell by 29 per cent. Spending on hospitals has never been cut as it was by the last Labour Government, who left the hospital building programme in total chaos.

People will have no confidence whatever in the speech by the hon. Member for Livingston, because it amounted simply to generalisations and at no stage did he set out how much he intended to spend on the health service. Over the past 15 years, the actions that caused most harm to health care had nothing to do with trust hospitals, contracting out or health charges. They were the industrial action that brought the 1979 winter of discontent and the health strike of 1982. That action lengthened the waiting lists and prevented patients from being treated. In 1979, the Labour Government did nothing to prevent the damage and in 1982 Labour supported the industrial

Mr. Harry Ewing (Falkirk, East): As a former Secretary of State, the right hon. Gentleman knows that the hospital building programme is a long-term project. When the Labour Government came to power in 1974, I found, as Health Minister at the Scottish Office, that there was no hospital building programme to inherit from the outgoing Tory Government. It took us some time to get into place a decent hospital building programme.

Sir Norman Fowler: I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman, but I do not accept that as the historical position. It is well set out in every objective history of that period that the Labour Government got into such devastating trouble with their economic policies that they had to cut every capital building programme, including that for hospitals. That is why the Labour Government were so disastrous for social services.

If predictions are required, mine is that the greatest danger for the future of health care—that is, services for the patient—is a Labour Government who are still in hock to the big public service unions. We have already seen the process in operation. Mr. Bickerstaffe has told Labour Front-Bench spokesmen that his members do not want any contracting out or competitive tendering. Without any discussion or argument, the hon. Member for Livingston has given an assurance on that to the unions. He would throw away, if he were in government, £50 million of income to the NHS.

There is no point in talking about underfunding of the health service when a shadow Secretary of State is prepared to agree to such demands. Those who are interested in health care should be concerned about that position because there is no point in giving the health service extra resources if those resources, rather than being devoted to patient care, are used to buy union support. Mr. Bickerstaffe clearly regards Labour Front-Bench spokesmen as soft touches, as pushovers.

The hon. Member for Livingston once again raised the issue of privatisation, but, in an effective speech, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State thoroughly and ably demolished those claims. This is not the first time that the privatisation issue has been raised. It was raised in the 1979, 1983 and 1987 elections. Not long before the 1983 election, I published a short document, called "Co-operation between the NHS and the private sector at district level", aimed at achieving sensible co-operation, for the benefit of patients, between the health service and the private sector.

I am glad to see the right hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Foot) here because, as Leader of the Opposition at the time, he described this as the most serious attack on the national health service since it was started. I am glad also to see the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) here. She said that we were secretly dismantling the health service.

Those statements sum up the attitude that the Labour party has displayed on health service policies over the past decade. It is not interested in any co-operation between the health service, the private sector and the voluntary sector. All we have is this sterile, barren knocking match between the two sides.

The privatisation claim should be seen for what it is. It has no substance. It is but an electoral card. The only difference is that this time the card is being played even before the election campaign has started. It has achieved the unlikely result of making the hon. Member for Oldham, West (Mr. Meacher) appear to be a master strategist. However, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is correct. The Labour party has already abandoned its central claim of privatisation, which must mean the organisation on the health service on private insurance lines.

The Labour party has a new claim—that of creeping privatisation—the basis of which must be a policy of national health charges. That is a curious accusation, because it was not a Conservative Government who introduced prescription charges, eye test charges and dental charges, but a Labour Government. One could construct a theory that Mr. Attlee and Mr. Gaitskell stand revealed as closet privatisers, but it is much more likely that the first post-war Labour Government faced the problem that has characterised the health service ever since—an increase in costs led by an increase in demand and therefore a need not only to raise resources but to use those resources to maximum effect for the benefit of patients.

Mr. Robert Litherland (Manchester, Central): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Norman Fowler: No, I shall not, because I do not wish to take up much time.

That is why so much of the Opposition case today and so much of the case that they set out in the country is so barren. There is no doubt that over the next year, the cost of the health service will increase because of an aging population and medical advances. Thus, the aim of the Government, of whatever political complexion, must be to achieve, through good management of the service, the maximum impact on health care.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Norman Fowler: I have already said that I shall not give way.

What trust hospitals are all about is devolution downwards. It is what any decently run company or

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corporation would do. I speak with at least some experience when I say that it cannot make any sense for all the decisions in a service of about 1 million people to be made by the Secretary of State at the centre. If Labour Front-Bench spokesmen do not understand that, they understand nothing about the NHS.

The Opposition oppose this policy, as they have opposed other changes. After the report from Roy Griffiths, I introduced general managers, to which they were opposed, despite the fact that there was no mechanism for making effective decisions. Today, they accept general managers and will not abolish them, despite two years opposing such a policy.

I remember that they opposed the selected list of drugs. As many of my hon. Friends will remember, they pressed me to make economies in the drugs budget, but when I tried to do so, they showed their great constructiveness by opposing my measures. If they ever come to government, they will not reverse that policy. Not even the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms. Harman) would put all those drugs back on prescription.

The Opposition have a great deal to be modest about in respect of their record in opposition. They have now announced their blanket opposition to competitive tendering in ancillary services such as catering and cleaning. There is no question but that that throws away resources, but the principle is that it is often more effective for a specialist company rather than an in-house organisation to do work such as catering and cleaning. There is nothing especially revolutionary about that—it is not even a matter of the public sector versus the private sector. Managers in all types of organisations have the option—sometimes they use it and sometimes they do not.

If the Labour party were in power, that option would be abolished, and that shows a good deal about the party. It shows what I can describe only as an antipathy towards outside industry, an antipathy which shifts only when the Labour party puts down a motion that deplores or regrets the decline in industry itself. However, above all, it shows an antipathy to good and effective management inside the health service, and that is what I regret most profoundly. Labour has no experience of management. That is not necessarily a criticism, but it is a criticism when I say that Labour shows no interest in good management.

The Government are right to aim for a better-managed health service and one in which the patients' interests are dominant rather than the interests of the providers. Labour's approach may scare some voters—I accept that it could easily do so—and I suppose it is possible that its approach may win a few votes. Personally, I should rather lose a few votes and do what I believe is right in this respect. In fact, I do not believe that the Government will lose votes on their health policy, because the Opposition have started their scare far too early. They are already being rumbled, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State showed in his brilliant speech, and by the last act, they will be revealed as bankrupt of policies. Basically, they stand for nothing but the interests of the big public service unions. We respect the legitimate interests of all those who work in the health service, but, above all, we stand for better patient care. I believe that we have the courage to pursue policies that will achieve better public health care.

6.22 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Cromarty and Skye): The debate on the future of the health service—especially that between the Secretary of State and his opposite number in the Labour party, the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook)—has become or has begun to resemble a cross between All Souls college and the All Saints road. This afternoon's debate is scarcely an exception. Somewhere in the middle of the claims and the counter-claims, of the inflated and exaggerated allegations from both parties, is the national health service. It is undoubtedly true that it is underfunded, that it suffers from low staff morale, that it is increasingly becoming a political football and that, on the basis of this afternoon's evidence, it is likely to remain so.

The Select Committee on Health could serve as a useful barometer. On occasions, despite its all-party nature, it has been able—as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) and the present Secretary of State surely know—to produce unanimous reports on many contentious, difficult and complex health issues. Sadly, that ability appears to be lacking in the Chamber, and the Government's reforms continue apace. That must partly be due to the way in which the Government went about their reforms.

Had the previous Prime Minister bowed out the leadership of the Conservative party after, say, a decade in office, one doubts that the reforms would have been introduced in the way that they have been, that the pace would have been accelerated as it has been or that they would have seen the light of day in their current form. I cannot envisage the current Prime Minister or the Secretary of State going about the reforms in the way that they are now obliged to do. They are living out the legacy left to them late in a Parliament and very late in the day for the Government.

When one considers that legacy and the about-turn in one aspect of policy which the Secretary of State mentioned on television yesterday—in respect of tax incentives foisted on the Cabinet and contained in the Budget two years ago against the wishes of the then Secretary of State for Health, the Chancellor and many others—one must ask, in view of the number of people in general management who are now on performance-related contracts in the health service, what return a Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues would enjoy in terms of performance-related ability for such about-turns in respect of the public purse within only 24 calendar months.

The Government decided to press ahead with the first tranche of trusts despite all the warnings. Last week, we heard about the second tranche of trusts despite the lack of democracy, the lack of consultation and the lack of public and professional consent. Mao Tse-tung was once asked what he thought of the French revolution. He sat back for a moment and then said, "It is too early to say." The same cannot be said about the NHS trusts. It is by no means too early to come to a conclusion about them. In the absence of pilot schemes the trusts have been a crazy way of going about reforms. The national health service——

Sir Jim Spicer (Dorset, West): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kennedy: Of course I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment.

Earlier this year, before we moved into the second wave of trusts and before the first wave had begun to hit serious problems, the Secretary of State made it categorically clear in the House and outside that in future Ministers would no longer have to take key decisions in the way they did at that time about which hospitals would go and which would stay. If hospitals were inefficient, if there was over-provision or if they could not provide the right type of care or treatment, they would wither on the vine under the new commercial internal market system.

But what did the Secretary of State say last week when phase two of the internal market system was announced? His statement contradicted the philosophy behind the Government's approach. Announcing the delay until April 1993 of the date on which the four London teaching hospitals would become operational trusts, he said:

> "I have asked the NHS management executive to establish devolved management in these hospitals at the same time as the other trust boards are established. In this way, these four great hospitals will get as early as possible the benefits of devolved management."—[*Official Report*, 16 October 1991; Vol. 196, c.312.]

We would not be against the benefits of devolved management. It makes sense to suggest that public money can be used more efficiently nearer the point where the care must be delivered. That points to greater devolution within the hospital sector of the health service, but the Secretary of State's statement contradicted the thinking behind the reforms. It makes it clear that one can have the devolved management structure without having to go the whole way towards NHS trust status. The Secretary of State admitted that contradiction in his concession last week.

Sir Jim Spicer: The main thrust of what the hon. Gentleman is saying is that we need to establish a track record on the trusts. I come from West Dorset, where three trusts have been established. We are side by side with the Yeovil district hospital, which is a trust. The hon. Gentleman talks about low staff morale, but in the five months since that trust has been established, staff morale is sky high and its record of achievement—alongside that of West Dorset—is remarkable. Perhaps he has discussed the issue with the leader of his party, but would it not be more politic for the leader to say that he has a good example on his own doorstep and that he would be wholly in favour of the policy if the same progress could be established as is seen in Yeovil hospital?

Mr. Kennedy: That is not the account that I received from the leader of my party. On his recent visit to that hospital he was concerned, as the local Member of Parliament, about the anxieties expressed to him by people in the hospital about the future funding basis. They were precisely the anxieties that have arisen about so many other trusts because of the uncertainty into which they are entering.

The hon. Member for Dorset, West (Sir J. Spicer) will appreciate that I am not in a position to bandy statistics with him about his part of the country, and I suspect that he does not want to give an in-depth account of health service provision on the north end of Skye. I will say to the hon. Gentleman that any step into the unknown, which for so many units—different sector hospitals in particular—trust status involves, is bound to bring with it apprehension, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) has reported to me. However, I shall draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend, and I am sure that he will be interested in what the hon. Gentleman has to say.

The hon. Member for Dorset, West has raised an important point. Surely it makes more sense, if one is to deliver more devolved management and more efficient use of public money within the hospital sector, to be more decentralist in one's approach to the management of the health service. By definition, in going down the hospital trust route, which they claim in part is about decentralisation and greater local autonomy, the Government do not follow the logic of the argument.

Local people are not enjoying a local say either in the decisions about trusts or in their subsequent operation. That has been seen over the past decade in the way in which health authority membership has been twisted again and again by the Government so that the prime qualification has become not knowledge of the health service or commitment to the area in which the health care is delivered, but first and most importantly: "Is this individual a card-carrying member of the Conservative party?" That makes people cynical about the changes they now see.

The cynicism has been heightened with the trusts because all too often the board, the company and the directors established and appointed do not have a tremendous—or any, in some cases—track record of experience of the health service, and do not have a local community identification in the area in which the trust will operate.

The Secretary of State announced last week, in the absence of any pilot scheme and now with only one specific, important and necessary independent inquiry into the health service in London, that he is pushing ahead. Why, if he can freeze the four teaching hospital applications, can he not apply the same principle further afield and freeze the second wave of trust applications? Indeed, he could go further and cancel them, and extend the London inquiry to a national basis. In the meantime, he should not pursue further any opt-outs in Scotland or in Wales.

Looking at the memoirs of the right hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Walker), the former Secretary of State for Wales, it was interesting to see his account of the time when trust status was first being discussed within the ranks of the Cabinet. He was allowed by the then Prime Minister, as he interestingly reveals in the memoirs, to treat Wales as a laboratory for his far more Keynesian approach to politics generally, rather than for the Thatcherite economics which was the order of the day. He concluded simply that NHS trust status would not be a relevant factor for Welsh health care delivery. That was not so in Scotland.

In the context of the all-important Kincardine and Deeside by-election, we have what the Minister of State, Scottish Office wants to hold up as the flagship NHS trust application for Scotland—the Foresterhill complex in Aberdeen. That flagship is more likely to prove an electoral Titanic for the Scottish Conservative party. In the context of the Grampian area and of Aberdeen in particular, there is no scope for any meaningful competition for Foresterhill.

The Foresterhill application effectively involves the confiscation of land from the university of Aberdeen, which has joint ownership of the site. If the hospital were to pay the university at the market rate, it would saddle the

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trust with so much capital debt that it would render the business plan meaningless, and the trust would be bankrupt even before it had been set up. Perhaps the Secretary of State will compensate the university for the loss of the site. However, that would be a blatant misuse of public funds for politically doctrinaire ends.

It would be utterly absurd for the same person to decide what level of compensation the university would receive for the loss of facilities, if the trust application went ahead, and to sit in judgment on the trust application itself. It would be a classic conflict of interest. It would not be allowed in the council chamber, and it should not be allowed in the Cabinet. That alone should render the entire application for the Foresterhill opt-out null and void forthwith. If the Government are not willing to give that message at the end of the debate tonight, they will get that message from the public in the by-election on 7 November.

What about the existing trusts which have already gone ahead in England? They should be reviewed case by case, given the remarkable financial holes which have opened up among many of them. Their financial viability, the community responsiveness and the extent to which they can be brought back under the health authority's ambit should all be guiding principles here. The membership of the trusts, and the whole question of the extent to which the buildings and the sites involved can be brought back directly into NHS public ownership, are also relevant.

It is not enough to look at the existing tranche of trusts, as the Labour party proposes to do, and to say that, on the appointed hour, all the gears will be thrown into reverse and there will be a further reorganisation in the other direction. I can assure the House that anyone talking to professionals in the health service knows that they are sickened by reorganisation after reorganisation, and that morale would be further depressed by that. A more pragmatic approach will have to be taken to the first wave of trusts.

Mr. Robert Hughes (Aberdeen, North): The hon. Gentleman is on an interesting point, especially in relation to the Foresterhill hospitals. Is he saying that, if the Secretary of State for Scotland agrees to the opting out of Foresterhill, matters should be left there, and that the health of the people in my constituency should be left to the vagaries of the trust? The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. He is either for the trusts or against them. He cannot hedge any more in Kincardine and Deeside.

Mr. Kennedy: There is no hedging going on in Kincardine and Deeside, or anywhere else, as the hon. Gentleman knows. The Liberal Democrat candidate in Kincardine and Deeside has organised a massive petition for many months before the by-election on the issue. I have just made the position clear. In Wales and in Scotland, there should be no opt-outs, full stop, because they are not there already. In England, there should be a complete cancellation of the second wave of proposed opt-outs.

For the first wave opt-outs which have already gone ahead, the presupposition must be against the continuance of NHS trusts, which means studying the membership of the trusts and the statutes under which the trusts have been established, including the ownership of the sites and of the land, the conditions of service of the staff, the contracts of employment and the lack of democracy that has bedevilled the entire process, to ensure that the national erosion of the health service does not go further. That is a clear and unequivocal statement of position.

Mr. Jim Sillars (Glasgow, Govan): Let us consider the position in Scotland. If the Tory Government ignore public opinion in Kincardine and Deeside and, let us say, in Ayr, where the Ayr district general hospital is also a candidate for trust status, will the Liberal democrats wish those hospitals not to be transferred back into the national health service?

Mr. Kennedy: No.

Mr. Sillars: The hon. Gentleman says no. Why should it be different in England?

Mr. Kennedy: With great respect to the hon. Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sillars), I must point out that I have said no such thing. The smile on the hon. Gentleman's face suggests that he knows that. I have made the position clear. In Committee and in the House, the Liberal Democrats opposed NHS trust status, and we continue to do so. I am talking about the first wave that have been approved in England. They are already up and running. The question that has to be addressed is how, in practical terms, they can be brought back under proper national health service management control. Practical legislative means are available to the Department of Health, and we argue that such means should be used. That position is clear.

Mr. Bob Cryer (Bradford, South) *rose*——

Mr. Kennedy: I want to continue.

The great financial difficulty into which the Government have got themselves into is that they have confused cross-boundary flows with an internal market. That has now been seen by the health authorities that are losing in terms of extra-contractual referrals. Indeed, halfway through the financial year, some health authorities find that the money that was set aside for extra-contractual referrals has been almost used up. So much for money following the patient; the patient is now following the money, due to the nature of the block contracts which have been entered into. They reduce GP and patient choice, and make nonsense of the so-called citizens charter—let alone any patients charter.

What, then, should be done about NHS funding? First, the Government have never properly recognised that the true level of health service inflation runs persistently higher than that expressed by the retail price index. The opinions of experts differ, but I think that it is fair to say that the difference is between 1 per cent. and 2 per cent.

That being the case, surely it is essential for the Government to increase annual expenditure on the health service by a minimum of 1 per cent., in real terms, above the level of health service inflation. If they are committed to growth in the service, that will be necessary not only to keep pace with developments in medical technology and with the demographic change that has increased the proportion of elderly people, but to advance.

Secondly, within that total the Government must include the abolition of charges for eye and dental tests. There is no doubt that, in the long term, the disincentive that those charges produce will cost the country more. People will choose not to use the excellent preventive services that are now available.

Mr. James Couchman (Gillingham): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the number of eye tests currently being carried out has risen almost to pre-charge level?

Mr. Kennedy: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is very badly informed. An analysis that we have conducted over the past 12 months, which covered several hundred constituencies, proved conclusively that, in the case of opticians, the opposite is the case.

Any dentist or optician will tell the hon. Gentleman that there are now two income categories that they can treat, providing the full range of preventive and promotional health services that they wish to provide. The first category comprises people on income support, whose treatment has been fully funded; the second comprises those who are sufficiently well off not to have to worry about the cost. Those who fall between the two categories —who now form the majority—are having to cut corners, and are not proceeding with the full-scale preventive treatment that is considered essential. The hon. Member for Gillingham (Mr. Couchman) is, quite simply, wrong.

The Labour party says—I do not doubt the sincerity of its intent—that it would make extra finance available as economic growth was achieved. We should, I think, view the position with a little more optimism: we should take the view that, in the event of 1 per cent. real growth on top of health service inflation, any economic growth on the basis of which further NHS funds could be provided should be seen as a health dividend—as a means of bringing Britain, bit by bit, more into line with our continental neighbours in terms of the proportion of GDP that we devote to health.

Mr. Rowe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kennedy: In fairness to Conservative Members, I want to finish my speech soon.

Thirdly, the Government must be prepared, if necessary, to use contingency reserves for the full funding of national pay awards. We must end the ludicrous and unfair system whereby awards that are decided centrally are not funded nationally, necessitating the making of local cuts. Our approach is honest, in that it recognises the need for those who criticise the Government for not spending enough to spell out the details of the additional expenditure that they themselves advocate. I sympathise with some Conservative Members, who must feel irritated when they hear complaints from Opposition Members who give no pledges or figures to back up those complaints. That is not the stance that we have taken; we have already made our costing public.

Trusts currently dominate the health debate, and I noticed that the word "trust" also dominated the conference address of the Conservative party chairman, who almost invoked Baldwin by saying, "Trust the people." The people do not trust the Government with the health service, and they certainly do not trust what the Government are telling them about the health service and hospital trusts.

The result of the Eastbourne by-election contributed somewhat, I believe, to the atmosphere that led to the downfall of the right hon. Member for Finchley (Mrs. Thatcher); the Ribble Valley result contributed somewhat to the circumstances that led to the withdrawal of the poll tax. I think that an appropriate result in the Kincardine and Deeside by-election—appropriate from our point of view, and that of the health service—could contribute to an end to further opt-outs, and a reversal of the policy itself.

The Government's reforms are as misconceived as the present Secretary of State for Health is miscast. There is a case for a realistic costed alternative; the Liberal Democrats will continue to argue in favour of it in the House, on the hustings and whenever the opportunity provides itself.

6.46 pm

Mr. Michael Morris (Northampton, South): First, I declare an interest: I am married to a general practitioner, and I am an adviser to two pharmaceutical companies.

This evening marks the first occasion on which I shall have voted with the Government on the national health service issue since the introduction of the GP contracts and the NHS reforms. I shall be doing so because it is now clear to me that the present Prime Minister is 110 per cent. committed to the national health service. He has made it abundantly plain to the nation not only that he believes in the service, but that he has used it throughout his life, and that his children were born into it. That commitment represents a gold standard that the public should understand and respect, and I think that they do.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has shown doggedness and tenacity in achieving a real increase in funds for the national health service. That is long overdue, and I pay tribute to him. Those of us who were here at the time of the 1974 Labour Government remember all too clearly the cuts that were made then; perhaps the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) was not here, but if he was, he must remember the debates that took place—I spoke in some of them. In particular, he must remember the 3 per cent. cut in nurses' pay, the 17 per cent. cut in doctors' pay and the 29 per cent. cut in capital expenditure on hospitals. I must tell the hon. Gentleman that that record does not stand up against the record achieved by the current Secretary of State.

Having conferred those words of praise on Ministers, I do not wish them to think that I am entirely satisfied with what is happening on the ground. I want to ask them some questions. First, are they really doing enough to chase the NHS executive up hill and down dale to implement the reforms? Let us look briefly at the role of the GPs as gatekeepers for a successful hospital service.

There is little doubt that the concept of fund holding —the concept, in effect, of the self-employed general practitioner—is attractive, and GPs will wish to continue in that role. Having read the medical press and listened to the views of many doctors all over the country, I am convinced that there is a general desire to adopt such arrangements. I hope that the artificial restriction in respect of the number of patients will be removed. There are GPs in my constituency who are under that level, but they are perfectly capable of becoming fund-holders if they so wish, although there is no compulsion.

Morale remains too low among our GPs. A letter about GPs' pay arrived this morning from the general medical services committee. It stated that targets have been achieved under the contract, but that it is the review body's desire to claw back the extra remuneration achieved by meeting those targets. If my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wants to switch off every GP in the

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country, there is no surer way to do that than to ensure that, if a GP meets his target, the extra money that he earns will be clawed back for achieving the target.

My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health issued an excellent press release on 18 October about the increase in the number of GPs using computers. That was a good press release, but it would carry more weight if there were not family health service authorities around the country which were unaware of their budget until this year was five months on and which have said that there will be no remuneration for maintenance payments. Even today, funds available for GP computerisation are inadequate to meet the targets that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State wishes to achieve.

One of the problems is how to tackle the FHSAs. We must stop some of the nonsense that is occurring. The exceptional FHSAs, which do something other than the norm, cause the trouble. In some cases, authorities will transfer resources from one budget to another, and that distorts general practice in that area. In other cases, money set aside for staff and premises is transhipped to another category of expenditure. There are GPs in some parts of the country—thankfully, not in my constituency—who are not being paid the full amount for what they achieved in the previous quarter. If my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State reflects on the GP contract, he must realise that it was probably a mistake to have only one medical representative or doctor on FHSAs. The experience of those dedicated people is necessary to make the system run smoothly.

Trust hospitals are, and always were, part of the national health service. They are part of devolved management, which was the concept behind trust status. The problem, as many of us who have studied these matters know, is that the strategy of my right hon. Friend's predecessor, the former Secretary of State for Health, to rush in with 57 new trusts without clear monitoring has proved to be a sticking point.

I agree with the hon. Member for Ross, Cromarty and Skye (Mr. Kennedy) that it makes no sense to proceed without a thorough analysis of what those 57 hospitals have achieved. If the vast majority are a success, we can go forward with total confidence. I believe that that may be the case, but I should like it confirmed.

With regard to the second wave, I considered the applications for the Oxford region, part of which I represent, and I was happy to support the majority of those applications. However, I thought that the submission by the Milton Keynes acute hospital was distinctly thin. That unit has not managed to live within its budget since it was created and it has been feather-bedded because it is a brand new city hospital for the new town of Milton Keynes. Nevertheless, its application was approved. Decisions of that kind cause difficulties.

Northampton general hospital has not sought trust status yet, but what safeguards will apply to that hospital if the hospital in Milton Keynes faces difficulties? Will Milton Keynes once again receive the extra resources to the detriment of the remaining hospitals in the Oxford region? If devolved management is the basis of the development of the hospital side of the NHS, we should remember that there are two forms of devolved management in education—grant-maintained status and local management status. Although trust status may be one form of devolved management in the health service, one hopes that there may also be others—this should not be a black or white issue.

I fervently believe that it the right of every patient—and, through the patient, the GP—to know how long he or she will have to wait. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on setting firm targets, so that, by next March, no one will be on a waiting list for more than two years, and that, by March 1993, no one will be on a waiting list for more than one year. Both those targets are praiseworthy. However, it is not sufficient simply to consider in-patient waiting lists; we must also consider the delays in obtaining out-patient appointments. We must highlight that dimension as well.

The changes will not occur simply as a result of exhortations from the chief executive of the NHS. There must be a combination of relentless pressure for continuous quality improvement similar to that achieved by the quality control methodology of manufacturing industry. It also requires extra targeted resources. Why can we not have a monthly statement to show what we are achieving in comparison with our targets? All hon. Members receive a monthly statement about unemployment which is broken down to constituency and ward levels. If we can have such a service from one section of the state, why can we not have such information about the NHS?

The basic position of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is crystal clear. Whatever may have been the intentions of my right hon. Friend the Member for Finchley (Mrs. Thatcher), it is clear that the present—and, I believe, the future—Prime Minister uses the NHS; he believes in it, and he is grateful for what it has done for him and his family. The basic concept of its being free at the point of use is fundamental to him, to me and to all Conservatives. The other significant change is that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister recognises that the NHS requires extra real resources. However efficient the management may be—there is still a long way to go in that respect—we cannot hide the fact that the NHS's percentage of GNP must rise in this country. We should not be on a level with Greece and far below France, Germany, Italy and our other European partners in that regard. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister recognises that.

Labour never got the economy moving. Labour Members have never been able to achieve what they wanted in their hearts to achieve. Their desires remained desires and aspirations, never becoming a reality.

I remain critical of what is happening on the ground and of the way in which some of the strategies are interpreted at district health authority and FHSA level, but for the first time I can honestly say that we have a Prime Minister and a Secretary of State for Health who believe in a national health service. I shall therefore have pleasure in supporting the Government today.

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Paul Dean): I remind the House that the 10-minute limit on speeches operates from 7 pm.

6.59 pm

Mr. Michael Foot (Blaenau Gwent): I am the only Member who was present in the House to hear Aneurin Bevan make his Second Reading speech which introduced the national health service and also heard him, from the same Bench on which the hon. Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Morris) sits, deliver his resignation speech about charges that were imposed. I was hoping to have discussed some of that history, especially because the Secretary of State gave a most misleading account of it. He should not have done that. He should have taken a bit more notice. He might even have learnt something from a letter which appeared in *The Independent* the other day, which states:

"Sir: I am absolutely thrilled by William Waldegrave's undertaking for a complete reversal of Conservative policy on the NHS, that is, 'equal access to free health care throughout the country for everybody, regardless of their means'. My last two sessions of 'free' health care cost £52 (teeth) and £176 (eyes)."

Aneurin Bevan would have been especially interested in that letter. It was on precisely the charges that were introduced for teeth and spectacles that he resigned. He had some other excellent reasons for his resignation, but he tried to give a warning to the country, a warning to the Labour party, which was on the Government side of the House at that time, and a warning to some others, too. The whole country would have been wise to listen to what he said. He said:

"The Chancellor of the Exchequer in this year's Budget proposes to reduce the Health expenditure by £13 million—only £13 million out of £4,000 million."

He went on to state:

"What is to be squeezed out next year? Is it the upper half? When that has been squeezed out and the same principle holds good, what do you squeeze out the year after? Prescriptions? Hospital charges? Where do you stop? I have been accused of having agreed to a charge on prescriptions. That shows the danger of compromise. Because if it is pleaded against me that I agreed to the modification of the Health Service, then what will be pleaded against my right hon. Friends next year, and indeed what answer will they have if the vandals opposite come in?"

He was referring to the Opposition. He went on to state:

"What answer? The Health Service will be like Lavinia—all the limbs cut off and eventually her tongue cut out, too."—[*Official Report*, 23 April 1951, Vol. 487, c. 41-42.]

Many of us think that Aneurin Bevan had great prescience. I do not think that he foresaw the way in which the present Government would seek to impair the rights of people in the health service to raise their voices against the methods that were forced on them by the Government. He made a careful prophecy, and I hope that everyone will take account of it. The Secretary of State was wrong in his history of the subject, so I advise him to read the excellent history of the national health service by Charles Webster. Many of the problems that the health service had to face are set out.

The Times Literary Supplement review of that publication states:

"The miracle of the British National Health Service is not that it survived its delicate infancy but that it ever came to be born."

Then comes the prophecy:

"If it required a politician with the weight of an Aneurin Bevan to create the NHS, it will probably require one in the mould of Margaret Thatcher to dismember it."

The word "dismember" may be just as good as "privatise" because it means pretty well the same thing. It means exactly what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and my party have been describing to the country that the Government seek to do.

We can review the history of this measure as well as the history of what happened in the days of the Labour Government and the way in which we introduced the national health service and fought for it against all the opposition raised from Conservatives all over the country. There has been a history of this measure. The hon. Member for Northampton, South has made many brave speeches criticising the Government on the subject of the health service. He has much more knowledge of the health service than most of the rest of his party rolled together. They should take note of what he says. On previous occasions he has been even more critical. He now says, "It is different. The policy that is now being pursued by the new Prime Minister is different from the one that was introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Finchley (Mrs. Thatcher) when she was Prime Minister."

We must be fair to the right hon. Member for Finchley. It may seem very strange for an Opposition Member to say that, but we should be fair even to her. She was responsible for the introduction of the measure. She was responsible for refusing to listen to the doctors, the British Medical Association and the royal colleges. She is the one who slammed the door in their faces and would not listen to them. It is most unfair that all the blame should be put upon her. She was much too impatient, but she had Ministers who were much too subservient. She was always hectoring and they were always cringing. She knew what she wanted to achieve; they knew they wanted to hang on to their jobs.

If anybody questions what I say, he or she has only to imagine what would have happened if any Secretary of State for Health—heaven knows, there are plenty of former Secretaries of State for Health on the Government side of the House—had dared to have the latter-day conversion which afflicted the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine). He belatedly decided that he would oppose the poll tax, even though he was quite prepared for the poor Scots to endure it. But he at least revolted. If one Secretary of State or one member of the Cabinet had dared to revolt, the Government would not have led us down that dangerous path which threatened the future of the national health service.

Ever since the new Prime Minister took his job—an Edmund Burke phrase rings in my mind—his Ministers have attempted meanly to sneak out of difficulties into which once they proudly strutted. Pretty well all of them strutted in. A couple of years ago, even the hon. Member for Northampton, South was an enthusiastic supporter throughout the country. He gave almost as much support to the proposals then as his right hon. Friend is giving to the present proposals. We see no great difference between them. Anyone who studies the reality will see that they are very much the same proposals—the same proposals which the right hon. Lady forced on her subservient Cabinet and the same proposals which they devised in the Cabinet committee that had never examined any of the proposals and objectives from the medical profession or the British Medical Association, as the hon. Gentleman will be keen to confirm. Even more serious is the fact that the heads of the royal colleges pleaded with the Government, the right hon. Lady and her subservient Ministers to listen. We could have been saved all that trouble.

[Mr. Michael Foot]

Five months, 10 months or two years ago, huge sums of money could have been saved. I am not sure whether we would have saved more than the losses on the poll tax—that would certainly mean setting it pretty high. As my hon. Friends have often said, we could have had a united, intelligent review of the health service.

Aneurin Bevan was never opposed to reviews of the health service. He even said that they should happen every five or 10 years to see how we should make the best advances and how we could make the whole apparatus more democratic. Indeed, he set out the measures to do that. In 1958, in his last speech on the health service, he told the Conservative Government, "You have had about five or six Ministers of Health. They have not been much good because, apart from their other disqualifications, they have been here such a short time that they are unable even to learn their job, and the main point of their job is how to stand up to the importunities of the Treasury." That was the delicate way in which he described it.

When we win the next election, as I am sure we shall, I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) will be given the same five-year period at the Ministry of Health as was given to Aneurin Bevan in 1945. When he was given the chance, Bevan said, "I want to stay here for five years to carry through the whole programme." One of our very best days since 1948, when the NHS provisions were introduced, will be when my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston, who has earned so much respect because of the way in which he has put his case, takes up the office of Secretary of State for Health and starts to clear up the terrible mess that the Conservative Government have made.

7.9 pm

Sir Timothy Raison (Aylesbury): I am one of those who enjoys listening to the right hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Foot) speaking as Aneurin Bevan's vicar on earth. It will be a sad day when we can no longer hear him speak in the House. Unusually for him, when the hon. Member for Ross, Cromarty and Skye (Mr. Kennedy) spoke on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, he used a tired phrase; he talked about health being treated as "a political football". I think that we all know in our hearts that that will continue and that there is absolutely no possibility of the House of Commons ceasing to take an interest in health or of its ceasing to do so in a thoroughly partisan way. Indeed, it is right that we should debate the health service in the Chamber and even inject party politics into the subject.

Having said that, however, we are reaching a situation when the Labour party's posture on this matter—and especially that of its Front-Bench spokesmen—is becoming more and more ludicrous. The scale and nature of Opposition Members' attacks on the health service are totally misleading and mendacious. Their case is becoming absurd and beginning to fall apart.

We all heard the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) once again trailing out a list of touching hard cases. The public are beginning to see through all that. It is time that the hon. Gentleman looked for something else to talk about. I notice that he is about to leave the Chamber, and I do not blame him for that. He talks a lot about long waiting lists, but the longest waiting list is the one that he is on in his search for office.

I genuinely believe that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has managed to reverse the gravamen of the political onslaught in the past few weeks. The way in which he has responded to Labour's irresponsible attacks and has clearly shown exactly what is happening in the health service has been enormously to his personal credit. It is beginning to get through to the public that there is something false in the Opposition's assertions.

I firmly believe that our structural changes are on the right lines. The introduction of the trusts and of budget-holding practices is a thoroughly good idea. I do not go along with those who say, "Let's sit back for a few years to consider whether they are a good idea." It would be totally wrong to block the growing impetus for reform in many parts of the country. I do not know what people in Scotland and Wales are saying—perhaps they do not want to experiment with trusts—but the blocking or deferral of the proposed trusts in my part of the country would lead to great disappointment. Anybody who has looked at what is happening or talked to the people involved will know that what I am saying is true.

I do not claim that we have always got our health service reforms right. It is pretty obvious that our reforms at the beginning of the 1970s were wrong. Although I dutifully voted for them, I now think that we introduced a grossly over-bureaucratic system in which tier was piled upon tier. That had to be dismantled. I am not trying to claim any unique virtue for my party's approach to such things, but I believe that we have now evolved a system that offers the possibility of a greater directness of management. It will be a much leaner system than in the past and one in which decisions will be taken where they should be taken. To use a naval analogy, we are trying to ensure that decisions will be taken on the bridge of the ship rather than in the Ministry of Defence. If that principle is sound in war, which it most certainly is, exactly the same should be true of running the health service.

As a result of the reforms, I believe that we shall see a more clear-cut management with incentives to efficiency through competition. It was interesting that the hon. Member for Livingston ended by saying that a Labour Government would be looking for incentives to try to increase efficiency and to reward success. Curiously, therefore, at the end of his speech he started to concede part of the philosophical argument. Of course, a Labour Government would not actually do that, whereas we have found a system that will achieve it. Indeed, until recently, socialism everywhere always led to a bureaucratic approach. The irony is that socialists elsewhere are now beginning to recognise the failures of the bureaucratic approach and are working hard at decentralisation. That is happening in the countries of eastern and central Europe—only the British Labour party is living in the past.

We all know that the health service will not be magically transformed overnight. Nobody expects that. However, given time to mature, I believe that the new system is heading in exactly the right direction. I should like to illustrate that point by examples from my constituency where the state of play is that we have four trusts or potential trusts. One has just been approved by the Secretary of State; one has been deferred; and two are included in the third wave.

The new trust that was accepted last week is the Aylesbury Vale community healthcare trust. I am sure that it will be outstandingly successful. The trust will cover adult mental health, the elderly mentally ill, mental handicap, physical rehabilitation and general community work, such as district nursing, health visiting, chiropody, and palliative care. It will come into being with strong popular support. Indeed, there was very little opposition to it at the discussion stage. Those who will operate the service are committed to it and the community health council supports it. It would be a bitter blow to say to those people, "Sit back, go away and do nothing for the next year or two." As I said, I can see no reason why that trust should not be outstandingly successful.

The trust in south Buckinghamshire, to be based around Wycombe, was deferred. Although that is sad because much good work went into its preparation, I do not necessarily blame my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for deciding to defer it, because it would be a single-district trust and I have always had some reservations about whether such trusts are the right way of proceeding. Perhaps some financial questions remain to be resolved. I am delighted, however, that although my right hon. Friend has made it clear that he cannot accept the application at this stage, he believes that the trust will be able to go ahead in due course and he will consider its application sympathetically. If we were to have a single health authority for the whole of Buckinghamshire instead of three different health authorities, I am sure that we would overcome the single district trust problem and that such a trust would then have the viability that it does not have at the moment.

The proposed third wave for the county ambulance service seems to make good sense. The other proposed third wave trust would cover Stoke Mandeville hospital. Although it is famous for its spinal injuries unit, it is, of course, a district general hospital as well. It has had some difficult problems and some disappointments over the delay in its redevelopment programme. It has also had various other problems, including overspending. Again, I believe that the best way of tackling those problems and of making use of its highly skilled staff would be to run the hospital from within the unit rather than imposing management from outside.

I am not criticising the past management, although they have had their difficulties, but if one asks what is the best way of running a unit that faces problems, of having a happy staff, of building up their morale and of tackling some tricky development problems, who could seriously deny that that is far more likely to be achieved by managing the unit from within—rather like a battleship—than by imposing the management from outside?

I believe that the underlying philosophy behind what we are setting out to achieve is absolutely right. Of course, there will be problems. The health service will be underfunded, but then, it will always be underfunded. Anyone who is honest will accept that it will always demand more and more money. However, on the crucial question of how we can best tackle the problems, increase morale and achieve clear-cut decision making, I believe that the idea of the trusts is right. It would be a great error to be pushed off course and to delay or abandon their implementation.

7.19 pm

Mr. David Young (Bolton, South-East): The Conservatives have always argued that the national health service is safe in their hands. In fact, it is about as safe as a chicken in the hands of a farmer who is about to wring its neck. The public support for the Labour party stems not from propaganda but from ordinary people's experience of the health service—people who are told that they have to wait for one or two years on the waiting list for an operation but that if they paid privately they could have the operation within days or weeks. That is not choice—that is extortion.

The Government have consistently argued that we have a free health service, but by extending the payment per prescription from 20p to £3·40, they seem to have flown in the face of that principle. They have certainly cancelled eye tests. They have also cancelled the dental test. The main sufferers when such tests are cancelled are the young and the old—the people most at risk whom we as a community should seek to help. If high blood pressure and glaucoma are not detected in an eye test, does that not lead once again to hospital lists being extended by people who have to go for remedial treatment, when preventive treatment would have been less costly?

During the past 12 years, we have seen the Conservatives create a two-tier health system. With 900,000 people on the waiting list, the incentive to the patient to go private is not choice but pain. The Government's policy has made the long waiting list the recruiting sergeant for private practice. A two-year waiting list may be acceptable to the Secretary of State, but when an 81-year-old woman is waiting for a hip replacement, the question which goes through her mind is, "Will the surgeon get to me before the undertaker does?" That is the choice that the party of choice provides.

Underlying the whole system is the fact that the quality of life of people on waiting lists is affected and undermined. In a civilised society, we should consider quality of life, if nothing else. The Conservative party claims to be the party of choice. What chance is there of going to the hospital of one's choice if one wants to go to a hospital to which the district health authority has not contracted out and if the extra referrals budget has gone by the board? What choice is there then?

What choice is there for the single elderly person who requires long-term nursing care if there is little or no community budget? What choice is there except a private nursing home? I am aware of what the Secretary of State for Social Security has said today about giving more money to such people, but unfortunately it is not elderly people but owners of private nursing homes who will receive the extra money. We shall soon see the charges at those private nursing homes increase once again.

However, that is not the question. What about the many people just above the benefit level and those who throughout their lives had saved for a rainy day? It will be a pouring day when they have to fork out £15,000 to £20,000 per annum for private treatment in a nursing home. What about people who are told that they have to sell their home in order to obtain treatment? Where are they when they can no longer afford that treatment? Will they be downgraded, as in America, from one nursing home to another? Is that the type of society that the Tory Government want? It is certainly the kind that they have created.

[Mr. David Young]

As a Member of Parliament for Bolton, I have always been concerned about the health of Bolton. No hon. Member who represents that area can be otherwise when one reads the Black report and other reports from the director of medical services which tell one about the health of Bolton. On 27 January 1981, I got the go-ahead from Sir George Young for the new Bolton general hospital. For almost a decade the Government failed to come across with the money. If the speculation in yesterday's *Sunday Mirror* is correct and the £37 million is to be diverted for other purposes—the article mentioned opting out and hospital trusts—that will be a gross betrayal of the people of Bolton.

Mr. Thurnham: The hon. Gentleman says that he is concerned about health in Bolton. Will he retract the bogus scare stories to which he was party about cancelled operations in the north-west? Does he accept that no health authority has said that there is any truth in it? In Bolton, there were only 651 operations not cancelled, but postponed, and 780 operations were put off because patients did not turn up for them. Is that financial cuts?

Mr. Young: I wish that the hon. Gentleman would use his own time and not mine. He will have a chance to make his speech. I have represented Bolton and I know of the cuts. One of the things that sickens the people of Bolton is this. When the right hon. Member for Finchley (Mrs. Thatcher) says, "I want the surgeon of my choice at the time of my choice," that is fair. But it is not fair that her policies have denied that to everyone else. A plasterer in my constituency has to remain idle because he has months to wait before he can have an operation on his elbow. That is what I am talking about when I complain about waiting lists.

It is no wonder that certain hon. Members become coy when they attack us on our assertions but will not declare whether they and their families depend on the national health service. That is the only criterion on which to judge whether people believe in the national health service. If they do not go into those hospitals or see the waiting lists, it is easy to argue in statistical terms, but one person on the waiting list for two years is one too many. If there had been an incentive to remove the waiting lists, it could have been done. Instead, the Government provided handouts in terms of private health insurance for the elderly, which the Secretary of State has retracted now that an election is approaching. I want a health service for all the people, not just for those who can buy their way out of the system. That is the health service that we want in Bolton and for the country—and that is why, after the next election, there will be three Labour Members of Parliament for Bolton.

7.29 pm

Sir Jim Spicer (Dorset, West): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Mr. Young). I and most hon. Members owe a great deal to the national health service over many years. I certainly do in personal terms, but even more in family terms.

My eldest daughter broke a leg. She had a broken leg for eight years. During that period she had 14 major operations. The last one took thirteen and a half hours. She is now walking on that leg and is healthy. Not once did she dream of moving out of the health service, and not once did she not receive superb treatment. I am sick and tired of hon. Members who try to say that we have the worst service in the world. We have the best service in the world, and the sooner we all recognise that, the better.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) is not here. I, too, shall return to that marvellous television programme, "On the Record", which I enjoyed enormously yesterday. In that programme, the hon. Gentleman was trying to be a good fairy—I mean that in the nice, old-fashioned sense. He was saying, in effect, "Vote for me and all will be well." As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear, the hon. Gentleman avoided some questions. First—this question will return time and again—how much additional funding does the Labour party believe to be essential for the NHS? Is it £2 billion a year, £3 billion, £4 billion, £5 billion or £6 billion? Hon. Members can ask that at various times of various Labour-Front Bench spokesmen and they will always get different answers.

My second question relates to the hon. Gentleman's speech today. How will he translate his obvious dislike of and distaste for private residential care, where so many elderly people reside with the help of the Government, into action if, unfortunately, he ever becomes the Secretary of State? Hundreds of thousands of people throughout the country would like an answer to that question.

I knew a geriatric hospital with wards of 10 or 20 beds which was to be closed. The spirit there was marvellous. I followed the case of each patient moved from that hospital. One old lady said to me, "I never thought that I would be able to live out my life in a room of my own with a view like this—I thought that I was condemned to living in a ward for the rest of my life." Is the hon. Gentleman against taking elderly people out of hospital institutions and putting them into private accommodation? The country and certainly my constituents would like to know.

The same "good fairy" gave the impression that he would wave a wand and, miraculously, the money to achieve everything would appear. He said that it would come from "the economy", but what possible growth in the economy can we rely on under a Labour Government? How many years does he expect that it will take to wipe out his theoretical underfunding? Yesterday the hon. Gentleman was coy about that, as he has been in the past. As my right hon. Friend said, the hon. Gentleman has changed his tack and stance on this time and again.

My third question is: how carefully has the hon. Gentleman researched authorities with trust status? In particular, has he looked at the West Dorset health authority, which has been fully trusted for its acute, community and mental health services since April? Perhaps he would like to visit us. If he or the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms. Harman) would like to come, we should be delighted to welcome them. They would see the resounding success achieved through wonderful co-operation between the authority, the trusts, the consultants, the doctors and all health service employees.

I will give some quick examples of what we achieved. From an annual budget this year of £77 million, we have already achieved a saving of £1·3 million, which will be devoted entirely to cutting waiting lists. Since April, 80 per cent. of patients have been treated within six months. Soon none will wait more than a year. Nobody will wait for two years, as the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East said. Even that one year wait will be exceptional. For each of the past three years, 6 per cent. more patients have been treated. There is a total commitment to the second phase of our splendid district hospital, which will combine all our acute resources on one site. Coupled with that, we have major improvements in all our community hospitals under our community trusts. On the mental health side, we have seen the closure of Harrison and Coldharbour hospitals —two marvellously run hospitals, but built 150 years ago. Their patients are now back in the community. I have seen what has been achieved even in six short months, and it is remarkable.

Will someone from the Opposition Front Bench please come and look at what is happening in west Dorset? I extend the same invitation to the hon. Member for Ross, Cromarty and Skye (Mr. Kennedy). He mentioned Yeovil hospital. That was where my daughter had most of her operations. There is no better hospital. It has trust status. The hon. Gentleman said that the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) visited the hospital recently and discovered that some people there were unhappy or, at least, uneasy about the future. Perhaps he talked to different people, because I have spoken to some people there in the past three or four days and they are happy.

I hear that the number of patients treated in Yeovil hospital is up by 5 per cent. since April, that waiting lists are substantially down and that only 63 patients have waited for more than a year, a decrease of 70 per cent. on last year's total. The hon. Gentleman said that he was sure that there must be a fly in the ointment somewhere and that the hospital would probably run into financial difficulties. It will not. It has a balanced budget. It is appointing five new consultants, three arising directly from the trust status, and more improvements are expected across the board. I am delighted that the right hon. Member for Yeovil will gain so much in his constituency as a result of the policies instituted by the Government and I hope, although I fear that it is a forlorn hope, that he and his colleagues will vote with the Government tonight.

I have made my position clear. I depend on the NHS and always will, and so will my family. So long as we have a Conservative Government wholly committed to it under our present Prime Minister, that NHS will continue to operate at an increasing level of efficiency and with better management. As has been said, proper management of scarce resources is the key. We cannot go on always throwing more money at the NHS. We must use that money more efficiently. Surely no one can deny us the right to do that.

7.37 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): The simple fact which neither the hon. Member for Dorset, West (Sir J. Spicer) nor any Tory Member who spoke before him has addressed is that the majority of British people believe that the Government are intent on privatising the national health service. The public are witnessing the obvious break-up of the NHS by a Government who have no electoral mandate for such action. It is the logical action of a Government who have privatised numerous state industries and who have a pathological hatred of collectivism, co-operation and of the socialism inherent in the principles of the NHS. It is the logical action of a political party that voted against the introduction of the NHS way back in the 1940s before I was born. The public are not stupid. They can see the obvious steps that have been taken in the direction of a health care market.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Foot) said that the Government had used certain processes in pursuing their policy and he identified one such process as destabilisation. Certainly the Government have destabilised the NHS as they deliberately decided to underfund it. According to the National Association of Health Authorities, the NHS was underfunded to the tune of £2·5 billion in the first 10 years of the Government's term of office. At the same time, however, the Government were able and prepared to give income tax concessions to people who already had plenty of money. We now see the results of that underfunding, because a quarter of all the NHS beds in Yorkshire have been closed. Not all those beds were for psychiatric or mentally handicapped patients; 15 per cent. of acute beds have been taken out of use within the Yorkshire regional health authority.

Industrial disputes in the NHS have been provoked deliberately. Those disputes included the nurses' legitimate claim for a decent working wage and the decent claim from the ambulance workers for an appropriate working wage in recognition of their expertise. The pay awards that were eventually arrived at were not funded by the Government.

The public see before their eyes that paying for health care is becoming the norm. They have witnessed the huge increase in prescription charges and the introduction of charges for eyesight and dental checks. The Government also introduced income tax concessions for private health care, the ultimate insult to a generation of elderly people who, in common with my right hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent, were around at the time the NHS was set up. Those people fought for the NHS, so is it any wonder that the Secretary of State has had to concede that that tax concession has been a shambles? Those elderly people do not believe in the concession. They share our commitment to a properly funded NHS, available to patients at the point of need.

The care of the elderly has been privatised. There are now 5,000 fewer elderly care beds in the hospital sector. In my area of Yorkshire, the number of private nursing beds has increased by 1,000 per cent. Hospital trusts, such as that in Bradford, have stated that they do not accept any responsibility for the nursing care of the elderly. They do not regard that as their job. In my constituency, NHS hospitals which were supposedly unsuitable for the care of the elderly have been closed. Sandal Grange is a classic example; it has reopened as a private nursing home. That is happening across the country.

The county hospital which previously cared for the elderly in my constituency has also been closed. We had been promised a new geriatric unit at Pinderfields hospital, but that has not come about. The old hospital has not been replaced. Snapethorpe hospital, recently rebuilt, has also been closed for the care of the elderly. Patients must now pay to go to private nursing homes to receive the care that they previously received from the NHS. Is that not equivalent to the privatisation of the NHS? Of course it is. My constituents know what is happening.

Charges have been introduced for the use of NHS facilities. Surely if people are charged to park their vehicles in hospital car parks, that is equivalent to privatisation. That is what has happened in my constituency. The people are being penalised. It is all right for Conservative Members to sneer at that, as car park charges may mean nothing to them—it is pocket money. However, for elderly people who struggle to run a car, such charges mean a great deal. Those people need their cars to get to hospital

[Mr. David Hinchliffe]

to visit their loved ones or to receive treatment. Conservative Members may sneer about that, but such charges are all part of the privatisation of the NHS.

Private consultation for my constituents is becoming the rule rather than the exception. It is the norm for people to have to pay to see a consultant before they are accepted into the system. Frequently they end up paying to visit Methley park hospital for private treatment. They should receive that care within the NHS by right.

It saddens me to know of case after case of elderly people who have paid all their lives towards the NHS and who believe in it. They now have to bribe a doctor to get the treatment that they should get by right. That is an absolute disgrace, but it is the reality in my area and elsewhere.

The public have also witnessed the reconstruction of the NHS—prompted by Government measures—as a competitive set of business units. Whether people have trusts in their area or not, the pattern is clear. The introduction of private-sector style management—a great success, according to one Conservative Member—has not been a success in my area. A man who used to run a biscuit factory was brought in to run the local NHS, but the mistakes made during that period are still being put right by the new management.

Conservative Members talk about the devolution of accountability—what absolute rot. What is the role of the community health councils? Supposedly they represent the voice of the patient, but that voice has been made to shut up. In my area, the CHC is no longer able to discuss anything in the meetings of the area health authority. It is unable to have any dialogue on issues of direct concern to it.

Obvious financial incentives have been offered to general practitioners to opt out of the system. I recently received a letter from a local GP in my area who described the way in which financial incentives are offered to GP practices to opt out and to become self-managing. He described the way in which Yorkshire regional health authority operates. He wrote:

> "In order to improve waiting list statistics they are seeking GP's help in removing from the waiting-lists those patients who have been waiting longer than one year. I presume they are hoping patients can be referred to a different Provider and so in terms of statistics would start their waiting period again. They are also hoping we will remove patients who have changed addresses, died, no longer need treatment or can be persuaded to opt for private treatment. Fund Holding practices will be paid a 'bounty' for each patient removed from the waiting list and a 'bonus' if on 1st April, 1992 there are no such patients. Yorkshire's Non-fund holding practices are to be asked to carry out the same 'ghost-culling' exercise but will not be paid for doing so. Whilst not giving any direct benefit to patients of Fund Holding practices it allows those practices to gain financially and therefore purchase better equipment and services for their patients. In essence it is a further financial carrot to encourage practices to become fund-holding and to strengthen the position of existing fund holders at the expense of non fund-holders."

That is a clear example of the way in which the Government are pushing public money at GPs to persuade them to manage their own budgets.

The Labour party has been accused recently of running a dirty tricks campaign about the NHS. I took particular note of a disgraceful article that appeared in *The Sunday Times* a week ago on the issue of Dr. Mark Baker moving to a consultant's post within the Yorkshire regional health authority. The news editor of *The Sunday Times*, Mr. Michael Williams, has accepted that that article contained at least six factual errors. He undertook to print, in full, a letter from me refuting the allegations in the article. I am sorry that Mr. Williams is not a man of his word, as he removed the main point of my letter—that Dr. Mark Baker had confirmed on BBC television the precise information I had released.

There is no need for dirty tricks, as it is quite apparent——

Madam Deputy Speaker (Miss Betty Boothroyd): Order. The hon. Gentleman has had his time.

7.48 pm

Mr. James Couchman (Gillingham): In common with my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Morris) may I first declare that I have an interest in two health care companies? I advise Pfizer, which is a Kent-based pharmaceutical manufacturer, and Denplan Ltd.

In common with my hon. Friend the Member for Dorset, West (Sir J. Spicer), may I also declare a family interest? Like the vast majority of the population, my family and I use the NHS for all our health care. Some colleagues will be aware that, during the past 18 months, my wife has been a cancer patient at Guy's hospital. During that time, she has received superb treatment and enjoyed the morale of the staff, which is extremely good. Throughout her serious illness, she has always been treated in a most encouraging manner. My family has always enjoyed satisfaction from the health service, and we use it exclusively for our health care.

I find it deeply insulting when Labour Members accuse us of wishing to privatise the health service. Why would we, who have enjoyed satisfaction from the national health service, wish to deprive others of such satisfaction? Opposition Members' actions in the past few months seem to have much more to do with propanganda and scare than with telling the truth about the health service as it is or would be under a Labour Government. It is regrettable that the nostrum of those propagandists of the 1930s and 1940s—that if a fabrication is repeated often enough it will be believed—has been taken up by Opposition Front-Bench Members.

I remember sitting throughout the entirety of the Bill for the reform of the health service that we are now discussing—the National Health Service and Community Care Bill. During those proceedings, there was little mention of privatisation. That was not the Opposition's objection at that time, and I suspect that their attempt to persuade people that we intend to privatise the health service has much more to do with elections than with telling the truth.

I, too, watched that excellent programme on BBC1 yesterday lunch time in which the hon. Member for Livingstone (Mr. Cook) was interviewed by Jonathan Dimbleby. What a slippery and evasive performance the hon. Gentleman gave, especially in relation to the resources that a Labour Government would provide for the health service. He did not say whether it will be £1 billion, £2 billion, £4 billion or £6 billion, but it does not matter, because the right hon. and learned Member for Monklands, East (Mr. Smith) will not pass over that money in any case.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman will take additional income tax and national insurance from all doctors and most nurses, and not a penny piece of it will be paid to the national health service, because all that additional revenue has been pledged in social security benefits to pensioners and in child benefit. I wonder how nurses and doctors will feel about that. They will say, "It's back to the same old swings. We remember the last Labour Government when our wages were reduced—nurses' by 3 per cent. and doctors' by 17 per cent."

That is in stark contrast to what the Government have done for the pay of nurses and doctors. In real terms, nurses' pay has gone up by 48 per cent. and doctors' pay by 39 per cent. Since 1979, spending on the health service has increased by 50 per cent. in real terms. The hon. Member for Ross, Cromarty and Skye (Mr. Kennedy), who is in his place, mentioned the increases that will be necessary. The Government have kept pace with those, but demand in the health service is infinite. It does not matter how much more money a putative Labour Government might put into the health service, because it would never be enough. It would always be outstripped by medical advance and the number of elderly people who require tremendous extra service.

Some 84 per cent. more patients are now treated in geriatric units. That is partly to do with the fact that it is no longer seen as the end of the road to end up in a geriatric unit bed, because geriatricians now work extremely hard to rehabilitate the elderly when they come into their charge. They may then go to a home outside, where almost all of them are supported by the state in some form. Some 293,000 people are now in homes supported by public funds, compared with 132,000 in 1979. Thus, more than twice as many people are now in homes for the elderly supported by public funds. That is the sort of improvement that has taken place since 1979.

We are constrained to speak for only a brief time this evening, but I should like to have said much more in this debate. I welcome the inquiry that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has set up into the situation in London. I was chairman of a health authority before entering the House, and I have long been convinced that London, especially inner London, is over-provided with health care. There is too great a concentration of high specialist units in the undergraduate teaching hospitals on the three-mile ride from Harley street which we all know and which has been recognised since 1909.

I hope that Sir Bernard Tomlinson, in his wide-ranging inquiry, will consult on the problems caused by over-concentration in London. There is no doubt that the hospitals on the inner London ring are starving constituencies such as mine—30 or 50 miles outside London—of resources. St. Thomas's hospital has had to give associate university status to the hospital in my constituency because insufficient ordinary or secondary care patients are going into St. Thomas's and there must always be 40 medical students at the Medway hospital because more people are living there.

I hope that Sir Bernard will be given a free hand to recommend the movement of those undergraduate teaching facilities out of London and into the provinces where they should be. That would remove at a stroke the reason for keeping too many of those hospitals open. I look forward to Sir Bernard's report being published soon.

7.57 pm

Mr. Robert Hughes (Aberdeen, North): I shall concentrate on the application for trust status by the Forresterhills hospitals in Aberdeen. The foreword of the application document says:

> "The Hospitals represented in this application have an excellent record of service to the public over many years. They are a most valuable asset for the people of the area and they play an essential role in the lives of each and every one of us."

I concur wholly with that and it is interesting that, in the rest of the document, not a single case is made about the applicants, who are involved in the health service in Aberdeen, being frustrated in their management or in making improvements. Nor is there any evidence to say that they could improve on what has gone before, except a vague promise of more flexibility.

On 9 October, which is less than a couple of weeks ago, the 90-day consultation period ended. Within five days of its ending, Grampian health board was able to write to the Secretary of State to say that it upheld and recommended the application. Some will say that it has acted with commendable speed. The Secretary of State for Scotland would certainly not take that view, however, because a local event of national importance is to take place in the locality covered by the hospital—the Kincardine and Deeside by-election.

The electors in that constituency will want to know when the Secretary of State will reply to the application and what response he will give. They will ask the Secretary of State and every Minister who goes there whether they agree with the Tory party candidate in the by-election who is opposed to opt-out status. Everyone is opposed to it, and the application should be refused. If Grampian health board was not prejudiced by its judgment before the application, when it said that the application should go ahead, it, too, would recommend rejection.

As for the consultation process, there were 3,919 responses of which 13 or 0·33 per cent. were for the application; 40 or 1·02 per cent. expressed no opinion, but said that they were certainly concerned; and 3,866—98·65 per cent.—were against the application. In addition, the People's Hospital Campaign in Aberdeen, which I co-chair with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Mr. Doran), entered a petition bearing 34,627 signatures.

One would think that Grampian health board would take account of the weight of all that evidence. In its letter to the Secretary of State the board says that it is worried about the number of objections, but goes on to discount them. It takes an interesting line, saying that the problem is that 3,559 of the responses were standard letters prepared by the People's Hospital Campaign and cannot be taken into account. The lives of Members of Parliament would be much easier, but we would be a damn sight less popular, if we replied to every standard letter that we received by saying that we did not take them into account. The Secretary of State would be surprised if that were so.

It is an insult to public opinion to reject such responses out of hand. However, let me be more than fair. If the vast number of responses received in the form of the People's Hospital Campaign standard letter are taken out of the total, we are left with 360 responses, of which only 13 were in favour, so the 0·33 per cent. in favour becomes 3·61 per cent.—hardly a mandate to proceed. The balance of judgment is entirely wrong.

Grampian health board's second line of attack is to say that the people do not understand what they are talking

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about, because they do not understand the process. The unit area medical advisory committee opposed the application. The area medical committee, covering the whole of the Grampian region, objected. The hospital's senior medical staff committee and the local medical committee, which represents general practitioners in the Grampian region, opposed the application. Every organisation and group involved with the health service opposed the application. For the health board to say that people do not understand what is going on is to denigrate all involved with the health service.

We were told that the consultation process was wide. The applicants produced a pamphlet in a tasteful shade of blue that spelt out the trust's advantages. At best, the pamphlet is disingenuous, and it also shows some incompetence. I received my copy only a fortnight before the consultation period ended, and I have no particular reason to believe that I was singled out. At the end, the pamphlet states:

> "Any other comments or expressions of support which you would wish to have taken into account should be sent direct to . . ."

It does not state that one can object. That is the so-called open consultation that the Government say they support—the pamphlet is, to put it mildly, disingenuous.

We are told that the proposal involves local choice by local people. The chairman-designate of the trust was approached by the chief executive of the NHS in Edinburgh—such is the local choice that those involved could not even choose their own chairman. What choice will they have once the application goes through? What about the others involved? Who asked them? Is the decision locally inspired, or is it imposed from above? I suspect that it is imposed from above.

The Government say that we are telling a lot of lies about privatisation, but let us consider what is happening in Aberdeen. The health board built, planned and paid for a 60-bed unit for its geriatric and psychogeriatric patients. It was planned that, from the day it opened, it should be run by the health service. But it has been contracted out to be run by a private medical company.

Within the Aberdeen health board district there is a hyperbaric centre which was developed in the 1980s to take care of divers in the North sea who need urgent medical treatment for the bends. That centre was included in the application, but it has already been stripped out. It was sold to a private company on Friday. The medical professionals running that centre have been told to clear their desks and get out within the week because their offices have been sold to a private diving company. The centre does not deal with marginal problems but saves lives; it is of great importance. It was sold off because it would cost money and was an expensive part of the service to develop, which is exactly what we said would happen. Services which are not commercially popular and which will be a drain on funds will be sold off. Another centre which deals with disturbed children who need psychiatric care was stripped from the application because it created difficulties.

Some two thirds of the land is owned by the health board and one third by the university. As the hon. Member for Ross, Cromarty and Skye (Mr. Kennedy) asked, will the land be free? Who will pay for it? Do we expect the trust to pay for it? It would never be able to borrow the money to pay for the university land, and the university cannot afford to give it away for nothing. Borrowing the funds would affect patient care. It is an absolute disgrace. Privatisation is proceeding apace and everyone in the House, including Conservative Members, knows it.

Everyone of repute in the Grampian region has opposed the application. Every candidate in the Kincardine and Deeside by-election opposes it. No case has been made approving the application. That is recognised by everyone, including the Tory candidate and every Conservative group on the regional and district councils. Every Conservative is against it. Are all those views to be overridden? It does not matter whether they are or not, because the electorate will override the Secretary of State come the Kincardine and Deeside by-election and, what is more, the electorate will override the Government come the general election. We shall have a service which is true to its principles, is free to people at the time of need and provides the best care. I support that, and I believe that the whole country supports it.

8.6 pm

Mr. Richard Page (Hertfordshire, South-West): It is fascinating how a phrase or word sometimes encapsulates in the public's mind a concept or idea. It is then either given the fair wind of approval, or rendered stillborn or handicapped at birth. I well remember, when I was in opposition, standing in the Chamber in early 1979 and using the phrase, "a winter of discontent". I do not claim copyright on that phrase, because I understand that an itinerant playwright had used it a few centuries before. But the phrase encapsulated in people's minds the Labour Government's embattled argument with their paymasters. The words used by the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) jarred with the truth as he started to say how well the Labour party had treated the national health service during its time in office.

I do not know who developed the phrase "opt out", but in doing so he or she created a fertile base on which the Labour party has been able to develop the various fears that it has put into the public's mind. When Lord Callaghan was Prime Minister, he once said that a lie could be halfway round the world before the truth had got its boots on. I have always borne that in mind, and we must get our boots on if we are to get round the world and nail the lie being circulated about the Government's attitude towards and plans for the national health service. That was one of the reasons why, last Wednesday——

Mr. Robert Litherland (Manchester, Central): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Page: No, I will not, as I am restricted to 10 minutes.

Last Wednesday, I tabled an early-day motion and immediately received 100 signatures for it. The motion deplored the scares and smears put about by the Opposition, and gave a commitment by Conservative Back Benchers that the health service would not be privatised, but would stay as a national service. I say bluntly that I would find it difficult to be a member of a party that did not provide health care for every man, woman and child in this country, irrespective of their private means.

Constituents have asked me why we are introducing change and proposing trusts which, they say, the doctors and consultants do not want. I have been forced to spend time explaining that the medical profession has not been of the brightest when taking managerial decisions. The medical profession was not in favour of the national health service in the first place.

I remember the furore over the funds for generic drugs. I remember doctors threatening to put up a reply to that idea in their surgeries—at least, that was what was said by doctors who were not on holiday in the West Indies enjoying the hospitality of some of the drug companies. The doctors have complained about budgets and trusts, but some of them are beginning to say that perhaps trusts are not so bad after all. Even their budgets, they say, are fine. They have started to realise what lies behind such schemes.

This series of poor initial judgments by some members of the medical profession has been seized on by the Labour party and used for its own ends. If my constituents persist, I shall also tell them another reason in favour of the changes. For four years, I have been privileged to serve on the Public Accounts Committee, and whenever a national health item comes to my attention, I have two conflicting emotions. The first is that this is a juicy item that we can get our teeth into—such items are always juicy: taxpayers' money is always being wasted. The second feeling is that I should put my head in my hands in despair at this waste of taxpayers' money under the present system. If Opposition Members want to sneer at these changes, I suggest that they work their way through some National Audit Office reports. They can then come back and tell us whether they think some changes should be introduced to the health service.

A recent example concerned health service supplies in England. I was struck by the absence of management data about them. If the NHS had gone out of its way to make life difficult, it could not have done a better job. It was impossible to compare regional data, because there was no common management system throughout the 14 regions.

I offer a few simple quotes from the NAO report:

> "The absence of readily available information about purchases from individual major suppliers weakens the negotiating position."

That is not the best way to look after taxpayers' money. From a commercial point of view, it is the most damning part of the exercise:

> "The NHS lacks the detailed data needed to carry out more penetrating but selective reviews of key business factors".

The plain fact is that the system does not have the information on which to make the necessary judgments.

The NAO found that such basic information as a list of the top 50 items by value purchased in the past two years was not available. Even the top 30 suppliers to each region could not be named.

I could go on, but I will not. I will not discuss the report on patient transport services or that on operating theatres, although I am glad to say that, following the NAO's report and the PAC's report, the usage percentage has risen from 50 or 60 per cent. to between 75 and 90 per cent.

There is no time to discuss the detail of the trusts or how they can be more efficient and can save taxpayers' money, allowing that money to be ploughed back into better services. Central control has not worked. The way forward lies in local control through local choice and local management. People should be paid for what they do. My hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham (Mr. Couchman) talked about money going into London and not into the shires. In the shires, we are doing excellent work and performing a great many operations at even lower cost.

Of course there will be errors and failures among the trusts, but they will be as nothing compared with the overall benefits and advantages.

The unfounded allegations about privatisation are being nailed. When the public realise that they have been duped by the Labour party, the backlash will be terrible, and it will be visited upon Opposition Members when the election comes.

8.14 pm

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): It simply will not do for the hon. Member for Hertfordshire, South-West (Mr. Page) to complain about a lack of information in the NHS, given that it was by proceeding so boldly without adequate information that the Government got into the mess that they are in. It was not sensible of the hon. Member for Gillingham (Mr. Couchman) to complain about the Government's belated discovery of the financing problems of the London teaching hospitals. All those things should have been known in advance and represent unnecessary difficulties into which the Government plunged through lack of foresight.

Labour Members are sensible enough not to imagine that the problems of funding teaching hospitals are confined to London. Some of the difficulties experienced by NHS opt-out trusts throughout the country are due to the difficulties in the system that the Government designed to try to fund the activities of medical and dental teaching —precisely the problems that they have now discovered in London.

The Opposition did not invent the ridulous machinery that is now crumbling around the Government. The Government complain about the costs of bureaucracy in the NHS, yet in an effort to control those costs they have utterly failed and, incredibly, costs have soared. In Newcastle upon Tyne, two of the four main hospitals now form NHS opt-out trusts—yet the costs of administering the district health authority have risen by 100 per cent. in two years due to lack of foresight on the part of the Government, who have only themselves to blame. The new, slimmed down Northern regional health authority costs 25 per cent. more to administer now than it did two years ago. These are the Government's failings and no one else's.

It was not the Opposition who decided that it was a fine idea to let private wings sprout in hospitals all over the country. That is what has happened at the Royal Victoria infirmary hospital in Newcastle, and that is proposed for the South Cleveland hospital. It was not the Opposition who designed the consultation procedure for NHS opt-out trusts. Incidentally, the two trusts recently approved for north Tees and south Tees, near the Langbaurgh constituency, failed to attract the support of one Conservative Member of Parliament from their area when applying for trust status.

It was not the Opposition who looked at the old long-stay geriatric hospitals, which were certainly a problem, and came up with the brillant solution of putting their inmates up for auction. Yet that is what happened at Ponteland and Lemington hospitals on Tyneside. The

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Government designed that solution. If they do not like the term "privatisation", I remind them that it was a term of their own devising and implementation.

The Opposition were not responsible for a system in which two hospitals in the same city compete by fair means or foul for the right to house a new fast-track cataract surgery unit. The north and south of the Northern region, in the system that the Government devised, are locked in combat over whether the monopoly of the Freeman hospital trust can be sufficiently broken to allow the southern end of the region on Teesside to have its own heart unit. Those difficulties were of the Government's own making.

The Opposition did not devise the system in which, in an effort to save its own budget, the Freeman hospital trust required kidney patients to go and collect prescriptions from their GPs at a cost of £3·40 and bring them back to the hospital for storage. The chairman of the Freeman hospital trust, who was once in the removal business, explained matters thus:

> "It is not a question of the Trust avoiding necessary expenditure or endeavouring to deflect the revenue burden into the primary care sector. It is however a question of choice and determination of priorities within a given resource allocation".

We did not devise the system whereby such short-changing in patient care can go on.

Miss D, one of my constituents, wants a cataract operation, and went for an NHS referral. She was told that she would have to wait 35 weeks for an out-patient appointment. However, Mrs. C. went to a consultant at the Freeman hospital trust, paid £25, and was told that the operation will cost £2,000, which she cannot afford. She was then accepted on the NHS waiting list for that hospital as an NHS referral. I am trying to have the £25 returned to her because, as she is an NHS referral, she is entitled to have her money back. The Opposition did not devise that system.

We also did not produce a report on the health of the nation which clearly demonstrates that a low-paid manual worker, his partner, his child and his parents will have an experience of illness dramatically different from that of people who are not low-paid manual workers. Conservative Members should bear that in mind in all our debates about low pay and a minimum wage. Attacking low pay through a minimum wage will make one of the most important contributions to the improvement of health that can possibly be made. We did not discover that information, but we have demonstrated that our policies will recover the situation and that we have the person to do it. I only wish that the opportunity which is coming our way could come a little faster.

8.21 pm

Mr. John Carlisle (Luton, North): I shall not follow the line taken by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins). I represent a constituency in the North-West Thames region and agree with the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham (Mr. Couchman), reinforced by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertfordshire, South-West (Mr. Page), about money going from London to the shire counties. We have collectively been campaigning on that since I came to the House. Many London hospitals are greatly overfunded and under-subscribed. If some of the funds and the manpower were switched from London, they might solve some of our problems.

My constituency has one of the best known hospitals adjacent to the M1—the Luton and Dunstable hospital, which, I am glad to say, has successfully applied for trust status, as has the South Bedfordshire health care unit. In the time that I have been privileged to represent them in this place, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of letters of complaint that I have had about the hospital service. It would be foolish to say that we do not have problems, but the hospitals have a fine record, a fine body of people running them and excellent doctors and nurses. In emergencies which occur because of the hospital's proximity to that major road, the staff do a wonderful job.

It is sad that campaigns against the trust application mounted by local people, and especially by the local Labour council, have found favour in some areas. Many of the fears and smears expressed by both Opposition parties have inevitably stuck, and many untruths have been expressed in and around my constituency by those promoting their own cause.

In May, for the first time in 15 years, Luton borough council had a Labour majority, which spent more than £20,000 on an opinion poll about whether the hospitals should have trust status. Out of the total resident population of 280,000 available to the hospitals, about 40,000 people in the borough of Luton took part in the opinion poll, and the majority was 3:1 for the hospital not becoming a trust. Such a result is quite understandable, in view of the campaign mounted by the Labour party.

The main reason for that decision was ignorance, and for that, some of us on the Conservative side can take some of the blame. However, much of it was due to the political manoeuvring of the Opposition, who unashamedly played on the fears of the most needy in our population. I cannot speak for other areas, but certainly in my area the Opposition campaign was disgraceful and will rebound upon them.

Labour and Liberal parties complain that not enough consultation took place before trust status was sought, and they say that the public were not consulted. I think the Opposition have also said that the medical profession itself was not consulted. South Bedfordshire health care unit wrote to 120 doctors inviting their comments and asking them to attend a meeting. Only six doctors responded. How can they complain about not being consulted?

South Bedfordshire placed newspaper advertisements about meetings in the area and, in particular, advertising a meeting in Luton which has a population of about 150,000. Despite massive advertising, only one citizen turned up at the Luton meeting. That shows that the Opposition may be hanging their hats on a rather spurious peg, because the public have not shown the interest that we would like them to show. People have been stirred up by misinformation, especially by the Opposition.

About two years ago, when trust status was first considered, consultants, doctors, nursing staff and hospital staff expressed opposition to the idea. That was understandable, because it was unknown territory and they did not know where they were going. Some of the opposition was forthright, and was certainly made known to me. Since then, it has been accurately reported that many consultants are in favour, and a recent expression of opinion showed that a majority are in favour. Nurses and doctors are also well on the side of trust status.

Opposition Members should note that members of the Confederation of Health Service Employees and the National Union of Public Employees have told hospital management that they are quite willing to work with them towards the trust coming to fruition next April. They also wish to be kept informed of proceedings. The Opposition think that they have everybody, including their favourite unions, on their side. Opposition Members who are sponsored by unions should go to their union bosses or, perhaps more importantly, to union members and ask them whether they are as opposed to trusts as their parliamentary representativess make them out to be. People in those unions understand that the welfare of those who work in the health service, certainly in my constituency, will be enhanced by trust status as they set their own starting levels, pay levels and conditions.

The Opposition do not seem to want to know that, for the first time in 26 years, hospitals are being returned to the people, who will control them. Through their representatives in the House and on the board, the people of Luton will be able to make known the needs of the area. Weasel words and siren voices from the Opposition will not be heard when the trusts come to fruition.

This is an exciting time for the health service; thank heavens the Government have had the courage not to throw money at the problem, as the Opposition would do, but are doing something about it. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his team on their courageous step, which will be more than welcome in my constituency and throughout the country. At the end of the day, we shall have a national health service of which we can be proud.

8.29 pm

Mrs. Rosie Barnes (Greenwich): Today's debate, like that over recent weeks, has been in something of a cul-de-sac. We have all opposed privatisation, questioned whether the motive behind these reforms was privatisation and asked, if it is, whether that is a good thing and, if it is not, what should be done in its place. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have suggested that privatisation may have been high on the agenda under the former Prime Minister. I have no doubt that there has been a change in direction and I feel more comfortable about the NHS because I believe that the current Prime Minister and Secretary of State do not intend to privatise it. That does not mean that I welcome these reforms, because they are fundamentally flawed and will not take the NHS in the right direction and solve the problems that it faces.

The NHS is underfunded. We spend a lower proportion of our gross domestic product on the NHS than do the United States or most of our European counterparts. We are way behind them, and we must redress that balance.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Is it not true that in the United States and on the continent, patients pay their own money when they go to see the doctor, while our system is free at the point of delivery and is supported by taxation?

Mrs. Barnes: Our system is largely supported through taxation, but, regrettably, charges are creeping into the system and they have to be added into the calculation.

There has to be increased funding to take account both of the increasing number of elderly people, who are expensive to treat, and improved technology. To some extent, the NHS is the victim of its own success. People are kept alive longer, so they are expensive when they are elderly, and the equipment to keep them alive is often expensive high technology. The loving care administered in the early days of the NHS required little treatment and so was much cheaper.

Therefore, it is worth reconsidering the introduction of an hypothecated tax, with a portion of income tax earmarked to go to the health service. People do not like paying tax or increases in tax. They prefer their taxes to be reduced, but there is a general agreement that they want the safety net of a health service that offers every facility when they or theirs want it. People would be prepared to pay a higher percentage of the gross domestic product towards the health service if they knew that that was where that portion of their income tax was going.

Some of the arguments about what has been described as the internal market could have been avoided. One of the first things that I did when I came here as a Member of Parliament in 1987 was to table an amendment to the Health and Medicines Bill to introduce a new form of patients' right, giving patients some control over their share of the NHS money. It would enable them to initiate the decision to go to an alternative health authority or even to the private sector, taking with them their share of the NHS money, if their health authority was not in a position to deliver the treatment that they needed within a reasonable time.

I did not think that we could promise utopia, so I suggested that the time in question should be based on what the 20 per cent. of best health authorities were delivering in the speciality. That would become the national benchmark time within which people were entitled to be treated. For example, if the top 20 health authorities were able to deliver hip replacements, where diagnosed as necessary, within five or six months, that would become the national benchmark. If a health authority could not give such treatment within that time, the patient would be entitled to make the decision to take his share of the NHS money and go elsewhere.

That form of internal market would have introduced a competitive edge into the NHS. Furthermore, the pivotal point of the decision-making process would have been not the doctor, but the patient. The decision would not be imposed on the patient. If he wanted to stay where he was and wait longer, that would be his choice. Apart from making the health service national—it is not at present—it would also have had the benefit of not destroying the doctor-patient relationship. Under the Government's proposals, the patient may feel that a decision is being imposed on him because it is the cheapest way to treat his case, not because it is the best or quickest way to do it or involves using the nearest hospital. That may not always be the case and I do not assert that all doctors work on that basis, but introducing a financial complication in the doctor-patient relationship is a regressive step.

The Government's proposals endanger the Cinderella services—geriatric and psychiatric care. The hospitals that choose to become trusts in the first and second waves may decide to push those services to one side because they are expensive and do not show up well on the economic indicators, and that will deprive the communities that they serve. I endorse further consideration of the possibility of

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making whole district health authorities trusts so that some of the devolution of power, some of the autonomy and some of the decision-making can be made at more local levels, taking into consideration the total provision for everybody in the community and ensuring a proper balance of what is needed across the board. That is preferable to one hospital going for the profitable services and booting out the others.

The Government's proposals will fragment rather than integrate the health service. General practitioners and hospitals should come under one umbrella and work closely together. The present system forces them apart. Doctors try to push treatment on to the hospital budgets and hospitals try to push treatment on to doctors' budgets. A district area trust would enable them to work together more harmoniously.

I have been worried by the glee with which the London hospital review has been picked up by representatives of the shires, who have shown their conviction that London has too much hospital provision, and even a surplus. As Member of Parliament for Greenwich, I have no such experience. I find that things have got marginally worse since some of the teaching hospitals which the residents of Greenwich have traditionally used have become self-governing. Where Greenwich district health authority has a contract with hospitals such as Guy's and St. Thomas's, people are not getting treatment more swiftly and efficiently than they were under the old system.

I am not talking about the conditions that will not worsen while people wait for treatment: I am talking about treatment such as radiotherapy for breast cancer. Recently, a woman came to my surgery to tell me that she had been diagnosed as having cancer of the breast; she was told that her condition was inoperable, that radiotherapy was important and that she should start as soon as possible. On being referred to Guy's she found that there was a long waiting list for this treatment. Others have come to me with stories of how they have to wait for surgery for their kidney problems.

In the last few moments available to me, I draw the attention of the House to some research in which I was involved in the mid-1980s before I came to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but the hon. Lady has run out of time.

8.39 pm

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenwich (Mrs. Barnes), and I hope that the intervention that she generously allowed me to make did not reduce her time. Her speech was thoughtful and constructive, and she outlined some of her reservations about the present reforms. However, in her speech one could trace several elements of common ground, not least on the issue of single trust status for a health authority district.

I am grateful for the opportunity to add my voice to the reassurances given by my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Secretary of State about the future of the national health service in the Government's hands. I, too, am a national health service patient and have, on the whole, received good treatment from it—with one exception, when I was the subject of negligence in the casualty department of a hospital at the time of a socialist Administration. I have no doubt that that hospital would have said that it was understaffed and underfunded, but I am realistic enought to know that mistakes can be made and problems can occur, and that whichever party is in government will try to do its best for the health service.

It must be repeated time and again that our national health service is unique, that it is free at the point of delivery to patients in the doctor's surgery and in the hospital, and that it is maintained through taxation. I am pleased that assurances have been given that that will remain so.

The facts are undeniable, not least that the Government have increased expenditure on the national health service at 3 per cent. above the rate of inflation each year since they were elected, with the cumulative effect of an increase of more than 50 per cent. I accept—as, I believe, would everyone with any common sense—that that is not enough, nor ever could be enough, and that the introduction of reforms makes added expenditure necessary. The reorganisation process soaks up valuable funds which could be directed to patient care.

There is a commitment to the national health service. It is all well and good for other parties to say that they would change things in the future, but in the past they have never been able to generate the money and put it where their mouths are. Conservative Governments have been in office longer than any other during the lifetime of the national health service, and during that lifetime—especially in the past 12 years—there has been a tremendous increase in capital expenditure on new hospitals which were badly needed. In the Macclesfield health authority area we have benefited from a new district general hospital on which about £11·5 million has been spent.

We know that money is not everything—it is how the money is spent that is so important. The Government not only are committed to ensuring the continuation of the health service which, as we know, is dear to the hearts of every citizen, but seek to improve the service, to make it more patient-sensitive and to return decision making about local health matters to where the decisions can best be taken, which is locally.

The health service faces challenges, and there are problems that need to be tackled. Indeed, health care has changed dramatically in the past two decades. Nowadays people live longer and new techniques have been developed to improve the quality of life. One has only to talk to people who have had new hip, knee or elbow operations to know what I mean—their lives have been truly transformed. New pharmaceutical products have been developed and have played a full part in therapeutic care, and diagnostic facilities such as scanners are now widely used. All that is to be welcomed.

Professionals are being encouraged to play their part in the management of the service—consultants, doctors, nurses and midwives. I make a plea for the latter group. I believe that, in the regrading which took place before the reforms were introduced, midwives came badly unstuck. We should recognise the unique skills of the midwife and the part that she plays in caring for women before, during and after birth, and also in caring for the newborn. The midwife's expertise cannot be replaced by others, and this country needs a well recruited and trained midwifery profession which is also well remunerated in accordance with the responsibilities undertaken.

I believe that many of the fears expressed about the future of the national health service stem from the fact that people do not understand the reforms or the way in which they are being implemented. Any change is anathema to those who do not realise that the NHS cannot be left in a fossilised state but must change to meet the challenges that I described earlier, not least the demographic changes.

Two health authorities—Crewe and Macclesfield—cover my constituency of Congleton. Leighton hospital, under Crewe health authority, was in the first wave of hospital trusts. Although not without difficulty, it has made steady progress and due to its greater flexibility it is able to respond more quickly to problems that arise. For example, the air conditioning plant in the operating theatres is at long last being tackled. That will affect the number of operations in the short term, as two theatres are out of commission while the work is being done, but it will assist in the long term and we shall not face the situation that we experienced this summer when theatre sessions were postponed because of the condition of the air and the heat.

The hospital, with its new trust status and also previously under the Crewe district health authority, has historically been underfunded because Liverpool has taken the lion's share of the resources within the Mersey regional health authority. It is not a question of the overall amount, but of how that money is allocated. That situation is being rectified and extra funding allocated to us again this year but, sadly, that funding is not coming fast enough. As in London, we wish to see a change in the way funds are given to different areas within the Mersey region.

Macclesfield health authority has expressed interest in applying for trust status in the third wave of applications, and I welcome the fact that the acute unit at the district general hospital and the community services are to go forward, I hope, as a single unit. That is a common sense approach which should greatly benefit the Congleton War Memorial hospital which lies on the periphery of the health authority area. That excellent local community hospital was founded after the first world war and was built and run by local subscription. Low-wage earners in the textile mills contributed a penny a week from their wages, and that commitment and support for the hospital is ingrained in the character of the people.

Over the years, as health care has changed, we have lost the operating theatre and the maternity unit, both of which we fought hard to retain. It should be noted that one of those facilities was lost under a socialist Administration and one under a Conservative Administration. We now believe that services to local people can be enhanced and that Congleton War Memorial hospital will play an increasingly important role in the successful provision of health care for my constituents.

I wish to mention community care briefly. Cranage Hall hospital in my constituency is a hospital home for the mentally handicapped. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Dorrell), recently visited it. I am concerned about the rate at which care in the community is being implemented. I have been to see people with a mental handicap who are now living in the community. A first-rate job is being done, and they are extremely happy. However, it must be remembered that to support those people in the community costs a huge amount of money.

Other people could also possibly benefit from living in the community, but there will always be a hard core of mentally and physically handicapped people who will have to live in what is called an institution but which often is, or can be, a comfortable hospital home. Asylum facilities must always be retained with all the treatments which are necessary—for example, the hydropool and physiotherapy. These facilities should be centres of excellence, and I hope that, in the plans for the future, such ideas will be taken on board and that action will be taken to ensure that those facilities are available for all handicapped people.

8.49 pm

Mr. Martin Redmond (Don Valley): This afternoon, we saw the spectacle of a Secretary of State in retreat, but it was not a capitulation. It was a tactical retreat by the Secretary of State, and an attempt to confuse the issue and to confuse the public in the hope of conning them into thinking that the national health service is safe in the Government's hands.

I have said clearly from the start that the Conservative Government are after a two-tier health system, with a private element, similar to the system in the United States. Anyone who wants that system should go over there and try it: it brings pain and misery. I believe passionately in the health service, so I want to protect it for the public. Regrettably, it appears that the Conservative Government do not.

The Government talk about democracy and about informing people. Perhaps they should inform the public of their true intentions towards the health service. If they want the people to have a say, they could have supported my ten-minute Bill which called for a referendum on opt-outs, or they could test the public with a general election. That might be the way forward.

The Government have said time and again that they intend to give power back to the people. The reverse has happened, because power has come to central Government. The great pity is that there is no local democracy and no accountability. The trusts are now in total control, and the general public have no access or input to decisions made about their health. The Conservative Government talk about consulting people, but the consultation is a sham.

Only the trusts and the Secretary of State have access to the financial business plan. Neither Trent regional health authority nor the local health authority has access to the financial business plans, yet we are expected to make a decision on their viability. It is a great pity.

In the old days, Doncaster health authority had 4·5 per cent. admin costs. I was proud to be part of that. Regrettably, since the trust has taken over, the budget has yo-yoed in a way that should give the Secretary of State grave concern. The trust does not seem able to manage its finances, yet the local health authority appears to be indifferent to what is going on in relation to the trust.

It has been said that the waiting lists are coming down. I want to draw attention to the unemployment list and to the way in which the Government have fiddled the figures, which do not reflect reality. The Minister may shake his head, but there are ways in which to fiddle the figures. I am sure that the Minister is aware of that and of the fact that that is taking place. I want no shaking of heads.

It is clear that the Doncaster Royal infirmary/Montagu trust has increased admin costs. Mr. Nicholson, the chief executive, used to be on about £30,000; he is now on approximately £55,000. There is the expense of another

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tier of administration, and it is disgraceful, because the money could be spent on improving the health care of patients.

When I asked about the chairman-elect of the new trust at Tickhill Road/St. Catherine's, Mr. Horsebury, I was told that he was not the chairman-elect. I lay money on the fact that he will be. When I asked Baroness Hooper about the appointment, I was told that it had been put forward by the Doncaster trust. When I asked Mike Bone, the executive officer, he said that the appointment had been put to them by the Department of Health. Either Baroness Hooper or Mike Bone is wrong. They cannot both be right. If they want to lie about silly things like that——

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman realises that the word that he has just used must be withdrawn.

Mr. Redmond: I withdraw it completely, Madam Deputy Speaker. There have certainly been some misleading statements from the——

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. "Misleading" is also an unacceptable word here.

Mr. Redmond: They have certainly conned people, Madam Deputy Speaker.

A constituent of mine in Conisborough was going for dialysis treatment to a Sheffield hospital. The group attending that session had to make their own way to the hospital by public transport. A complaint was made to me which I took up. Everyone attending the Wednesday session, bar my constituent, now has transport provided by the Sheffield hospital. He has obviously been victimised by the system for having complained to his Member of Parliament.

Another constituent has complained about the treatment that his wife gets at the Wednesday session at the new Tickhill Road/St. Catherine's trust. He has been told that his wife cannot go to the Wednesday session because the two nurses there are off sick. What is happening to treatment?

In the past, charity funds were given to the hospital for the extras—the cream on the cake. The charity funds are now being used to provide basic care, which is disgusting. The money from one fund-raising activity was not spent in the way that was intended. That may not be illegal, but it is immoral.

If the public want a guarantee about the future of the NHS, they can do only one sensible thing. They must demand a general election, vote Labour and ensure that the NHS is safe for future generations.

8.57 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): The Labour party's performance over the past few months has been utterly sickening, and their performance this afternoon has been breathtaking in its arrogance—in the party's complete refusal to answer in clear words, or in any words, three simple questions.

What the House needs, and what the nation deserves, is the truth. The truth is this: the state of affairs in the nation is not as Labour claims. If the public are told the truth, they support the Government's proposals; if the campaigners against change tell the truth, they must admit that their opposition to those proposals takes the form of orchestrated self-interest, rather than genuine concern for the sick and the elderly. As for the truth about NHS trusts, if people consider and discuss the facts, rather than simply trying to scare others, it will become clear that trusts will lead to better public health care for all.

Rather than swapping the kind of ill-researched generalities that the Labour party likes to use, let me try to get at the truth by referring to a case study. Ashford hospital, Middlesex, is in my constituency—*[Interruption.]* If hon. Members would listen, they too could get at the truth, rather than trying to blind the world with their bias.

Ashford hospital is one of the two district general hospitals in the Hounslow and Spelthorne district health authority area. When they use the hospital, its patients—my constituents—simply do not recognise the scare stories put about by the Labour party; they see those stories as fantasy. The waiting list at that hospital has been greatly reduced: it is one of the shortest in my part of south-east England, and is far shorter than it was when I became the local Member of Parliament four years ago. The hospital has the lowest costs in the area. None of us, professionals or lay people, knew what the costs really were before the Government's reforms were introduced.

Let me give an example. The cost of general surgery at Ashford hospital is £887 per patient. At the other hospital in my district, the cost is £2,060. At the five other local hospitals outside my district, the highest cost is £1,400 and the lowest £1,200. Ashford hospital is significantly cheaper, and makes better use of money; but, before the reforms, we simply did not know that. My constituents now have quicker access to treatment, and about twice as many patients can be treated in a low-cost hospital as can be treated in a high-cost hospital.

Let us test Labour's claims about public opinion against the true position of Ashford hospital. Labour tells us that consultants are against the Government's proposals. Consultants at Ashford carried out a public vote: 32 were in favour of the proposals, while six opposed them. The director of nursing researched nurse opinion, and reported that 50 per cent. supported the changes, while 50 per cent. were neutral—not against.

Detailed consultation on personal issues took place with other staff. Only recently, all the portering staff were invited to take part in a discussion. The only subject that concerned them was whether their jobs were secure, not whether the proposals would benefit patients.

Then there is the question of public opinion. As the local Member of Parliament, I have received fewer than half a dozen letters opposing trust status. The community health council held a meeting, to which just 40 of my 70,000 constituents turned up. The hospital held four public meetings. At the first three, about 50 people were present; at the second, third and fourth, more than 20 who attended were the same people as before, asking the same questions; at the fourth, just 140 were there.

Seventy-three letters were written to the region about the application for trust status. In one of my local newspapers, an anti-Government pressure group admitted that it had written 67 of those letters. The group claimed that the fact that only six letters opposing the trust had been received by the region demonstrated apathy. It does not: it demonstrates the contentment of the people I represent.

Let us now test Labour's claims about the spontaneity and genuineness of opposition to trust status. I suffer from the presence in my constituency of a very vocal anti-Government pressure group—[HON. MEMBERS: "It is called the Labour party."] No, it is not the Labour party; the Labour party will be glad of that in a moment.

That pressure group claims to speak for local people about health care. But the founder of Hospital Alert, which plagues the life out of my constituents, recently spoke at an anti-Government rally of the Workers Revolutionary party, and duped a number of general practitioners into signing an anti-Government petition. She recently addressed an "all trade union alliance" conference which called for a general strike to bring down the Tory Government. That is the truth about the campaign against NHS trusts at Ashford. It is not spontaneous; it is not on behalf of the public; and it is not altruistic. It is orchestrated, it is individual and it is cynically self-seeking.

Let us test Labour's scare stories about NHS trusts against the truth at Ashford. We are all grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for including Ashford in the second wave. As I have said, the professionals and the managers at Ashford and the lay people in my constituency have joined to support what has happened. We believe that more people will benefit from the shorter waiting lists, and more people will be treated at lower cost at Ashford as a result of trust status. Everyone in my constituency will benefit from local priorities being decided locally.

The case study that I have described shows that the truth is not as Labour claims it to be. The Government's reforms have received professional and lay support. Despite what Labour says, those reforms will produce better local services. They will make the NHS in my constituency much more public and much less private—if that is the gibe that the Labour party wants to throw about.

I believe that the country is beginning to understand clearly that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is telling the truth. As a Government and a party, we have improved and will continue to improve the NHS. We have no plans, and never will have plans, to privatise the NHS. That is not the truth. To claim otherwise ignores the facts that stare people in the face. If the Labour party continues to indulge in the politics of the sewer, it will reap the rewards that it justly deserves.

9.6 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): We all appreciated the contribution from the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire). However, I recall that one rule of logic is not to argue from the particular to the general and reach a conclusion covering all. I was glad to learn that the hon. Gentleman is happy about what is happening in Ashford, but there are concerns about the national situation.

I am delighted to be able to contribute to the debate and was pleased to see that the Minister responsible for health care in Northern Ireland was on the Government Front Bench earlier. We are talking about the national health service.

Like other hon. Members, I commit myself to the NHS. My wife and I are NHS patients and my daughter serves in the NHS. I served on the old Social Services Select Committee and I am currently a member of the Select Committee on Health. When we carried out an objective study into NHS funding, we discovered that it was massively underfunded. At that time, we were shot down by the Government's response. I am happy to acknowledge that since then a tremendous amount of money has been poured into the health service. However, having said that, anyone who believes that the health service is as perfect as we would like it to be, is not living in the real world. I want to contribute to the debate because I am concerned that we should continue to improve the NHS.

The hon. Member for Hertfordshire, South-West (Mr. Page) dismissed the doctors' participation and called them hopeless managers, while the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) welcomed the fact that we now have professionals—including doctors and nurses—in the management of the health service. I favour the view of the hon. Member for Congleton. I appreciate that not every doctor will be a good manager. However, when we moved from administrators to general management, did we significantly improve the management of the health service? I believe that we did not. In moments of cynicism I believe that we simply changed the title of "administrator" and handed several thousands of pounds more to general managers who just continued not to do the work that they should have been doing before. If people believe that no improvements can be made in the health service, they are not living in the real world.

We should not be conned into thinking that movements forward at this moment will be the panacea of all ills. I am thinking, for example of ordinary patients. A woman whom I visited in my constituency on Saturday morning has been a patient in the health service since the mid-1970s. Among other problems, she has an abscess in her breast. If only she could be operated on, as the medical folk realise the situation. The hospital sent a letter informing her that there was no bed available for her but it included a note saying that an amenity bed would be available.

I thought that that must be like Conservative party central office sending me a letter under the signature of the chairman of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Patten), looking for subscriptions for and membership of the Tory party. The Conservatives have only recently been prepared to organise in Northern Ireland whereas hitherto they were not. I suspect that the relevant person in the health service was travelling more on hope than on confidence that a person in a working-class home, after years of illness, could pay for an amenity bed in a national health service hospital. That was one of the scandals of the matter.

Those who believe that hospital trusts will remedy the situation because we have management at the grass roots level may be due for a shock. Even at that level, managers may not be of the required calibre. If I may repeat the nautical metaphor used by the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Sir T. Raison), instead of a ship being directed by the Ministry of Defence, it should be directed from the bridge. I often wonder what would have happened at Trafalgar if Nelson had not turned a blind eye to the admiral's signal.

There will be pressure. Those who opt for national health trust status have an instinct that they could be interfered with even more dramatically by directives from the Department than they have already. I trust that, in the coming weeks, hon. Members, regardless of the party that they represent, will realise that, if we make the national

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health service a political football, we will discover that the general electorate—patients, practitioners and friends of patients—will give another judgment.

9.12 pm

Mr. Robert Hayward (Kingswood): Time is short, so I shall be brief, but I should like to deal with a comment by the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth). No hon. Member believes that all is right within the health service. There are many problems in the health service in my constituency with which, unfortunately, I do not have time to deal. However, I shall refer to many of the substantial changes and improvements that I have seen in the past few years. I do that because the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) recently came to my constituency. He did not, as would normally be the case, advise me that he intended to do so. He held a press conference outside a hospital in my constituency—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Members deride that fact. They fail to recognise that, in so doing, the hon. Gentleman had alongside him the Labour candidate for my constituency, one Councillor Berry, who is leader of the Labour group on Avon council. Councillor Berry was a member of Frenshay health authority.

The Labour party consistently tells us that it is committed to the health service. Let us look at the record of Councillor Berry. He was elected to Frenshay health authority in February 1990. I have with me the minutes of Frenshay health authority for 1990. At the bottom they state, "Apologies, Dr. R. Berry." I have with me the March minutes for Frenshay health authority. *[Interruption.]* They do not state "apologies". They state:

> "The chairman welcomed Dr. Berry, who was attending the first meeting of the Authority."

He might have said that he was also attending the last meeting of the Frenshay health authority.

I say that because I have the April 1990 minutes with me, which state, "Apologies from Dr. Berry." The May 1990 minutes again state, "Apologies from Dr. Berry." The June 1990 minutes also state, "Apologies from Dr. Berry, and the July 1990 minutes again read "Apologies from Dr. Berry." Councillor Dr. Berry was absent from 83 per cent. of the health authority meetings that he was invited to attend. That is the caring Labour party. That is the person whom the hon. Member for Livingston stood alongside, saying, "We believe in and are interested in the health authority." If he is so interested in the health authority, why did Councillor Berry miss 83 per cent. of its meetings?

I should like to ask the hon. Member for Livingston and his hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Ms. Harman), who is to reply to the debate, why no member of the shadow Treasury team was present on the Opposition Front Bench for the hon. Gentleman's speech. The answer is that they were embarrassed by the expenditure commitments, amounting to billions of pounds, that they knew that the hon. Gentleman would be likely to make. Neither the right hon. and learned Member for Monklands, East (Mr. Smith), nor the hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett), nor any member of the shadow Treasury team, was present for the hon. Gentleman's speech.

During the time the Conservative Government have been in power, and while I have been a Member of Parliament, the hon. Member for Livingston has visited Cosham hospital. When there, he could have mentioned the brand new hospital at Taunton and the one at Weston-super-Mare, or the complete reconstruction of the Bristol eye hospital, all of which are just a few miles from Cosham. He could have referred to the brand new ambulance station in Soundwell road in my constituency, only 450 yd from where he was standing—I know because I measured the distance this weekend.

He could also have referred to the brand new health centre, sited right next door to the hospital at which he was speaking and which had been opened only a few months previously. He could also have walked into Cosham hospital where he would have seen a plaque commemorating the opening of a new ward to care for the elderly, especially those suffering from senile dementia. He would not do that, of course, because the plaque commemorated the opening of the new ward by me.

Page 5 of last Saturday's *Bristol Evening Post* has the headline "Hospital boost for elderly". The article states:

> "Keynsham hospital hopes to open its new 24-place wing for the elderly and mentally ill next summer."

Turning over the page, one sees the headline: "Hospital bosses get op theatre go-ahead". That article states:

> "Health chiefs have given the go-ahead for a £5 million scheme for new operating theatres at the Bristol Royal Infirmary."

That was only the day after my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State opened a new urology unit at Southmead hospital.

Yes, there are problems in the health service, but we have made enormous advances in the past few years. The benefits are there to be seen in my constituency and the immediately surrounding area by anyone who chooses to look, including the hon. Member for Livingston.

Like the vast majority of people in my constituency, I believe my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that the health service is not being privatised. So far as I am concerned, it will not be privatised so long as I or anyone else is a patient in it. Unlike the hon. Member for Livingston, I remember 1977 when my grandfather lost his eyesight because his eye operation was cancelled. Twenty years ago, my left arm was not operated on for five hours after I had broken it, simply because an anaesthetist was not available. She had to be brought in from a party. Yes, there are problems in the health service, but we should all recognise that they have existed for a long time.

9.19 pm

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): When the Government came into office in 1979, they embarked on a strategy of privatising and selling off Britain by the pound. Privatisation takes many forms. One is to sell off good companies such as Amersham International. Another is to sell off utilities. Another is to introduce private contractors into services such as the national health service. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) seemed proud of it, but whatever he may say, the introduction of such private contractors has been devastating. Dedicated, hardworking domestics were sacrificed on the altar of privatisation. We were told that such efficiency savings that were made would be used to improve patient care. What absolute rubbish. Any ward sister will tell one that a domestic is an integral part of the ward team and often acts as the eyes and ears of the ward.

In the Health Select Committee, the National Childbirth Trust told us that a study which it had conducted of women giving birth in hospitals showed an overall post-natal infection rate of 21·9 per cent. It blamed that on the standard of cleanliness in hospitals. The position is so bad that, in their anti-natal classes, the NCT teachers recommend that pregnant women take cleaning materials into hospital with them. In that case it would seem that privatisation breeds germs.

But it is in the wholesale privatisation of the care of the elderly sick that the Government have had such a spectacular success. By squeezing the district health authorities of cash and appointing their friends as chairs and managers of the DHAs, the Government have brought about a major change in health care provision for the elderly sick. It has been changed from a service free at the point of use to one in the private sector where the elderly sick or their relatives are increasingly asked to make a contribution towards their care. Who took that decision? There was no Act of Parliament, but there was a change and a hidden agenda.

In the 1980s, the Government decided that the elderly sick would be called bed blockers and that there would be no long-stay care for them. Relatives were offered lists of private nursing homes. It became impossible to get a bed, or at least to keep it, if one was elderly and sick. That is part of the Government's hidden agenda of privatisation of the NHS.

Earlier this year, Alan Templeton, the chair of Calderdale district health authority, told Calderdale community health council that it was not the responsibility of the DHA to provide long-term institutional nursing care, but that its duty was to support individuals in the community before and after episodes of medical support in hospital. Who gave him or anyone else the right to deny my elderly sick constituents an NHS hospital bed? When was it decided that after a certain age people could no longer have treatment in the NHS?

Why cannot we have NHS nursing homes? I had a case of a woman who was well into her eighties whose daughter had looked after her. Mrs. Jones had diabetes, was blind and needed daily injections. She had ulcers on her legs which needed dressing daily. She was confused and incontinent and she developed pneumonia. She needed medication, medical care, nursing care and a hospital bed. The daughter was told that no hospital bed was available. In the end a bed was found in a private nursing home. You or I would have qualified for a bed, Madam Deputy Speaker. A wicked and cynical policy has developed which redefines illness according to age, and the Government are responsible for it.

Another way to privatise the service is to starve the district health authority of funds, thus lengthening waiting lists for operations and forcing people into the private sector. That is happening increasingly with the elderly. Mr. Only, a 70-year-old pensioner, wrote to me. He had been waiting 17 months for a cataract operation. He was going blind and was told that he would have to wait another six months, but that if he was willing to pay he could have the operation done within days. That is privatisation.

In April we got the market system, based on the American system. That gave us the trusts. We all know that the Government bulldozed the trusts through Parliament. If they are still telling us that the trusts will not be privatised, why is it that the Secretary of State for Health issues circulars for action by all health authorities when it comes to infection control of deadly diseases, such as hepatitis B and HIV, yet when it comes to the trusts he offers the circulars for information only? It is because he has relinquished power over the trusts and the trusts are one general election away from being private hospitals. They are separate bodies, and we know it.

The trusts and the market system are creating great anxiety for staff. They know that their jobs are not safe. The document "Changing Labour Utilisation in NHS Trusts" is causing anxiety to staff. Given the Government's record on privatisation, I do not believe that they do not intend to privatise the health service, and nor do the British people, who will show that at the general election.

9.25 pm

Ms. Harriet Harman (Peckham): What has been striking about this debate is that, on such an important matter as the national health service, Conservative Members have not been prepared, or have not found the courage, to speak up for their constituents—for all their constituents on waiting lists in pain and anxiety, for all their constituents who have had their operations cancelled and for all their constituents who are worried about their hospitals opting out and whose Member of Parliament refuses to listen to them.

What was striking about the speech of the Secretary of State was that it showed not a glimmer of recognition of the crisis that we all know exists in the NHS. We know, and so do patients who use the NHS, that it is being damaged by a threefold Tory attack: underfunding, commercialisation and privatisation. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish."]

The Secretary of State tried to nit-pick about definitions. He attacked our candidate in Langbaurgh. He has accused us, as have his Ministers, of lying. All that that will do is convince people that the Government are refusing to face up to the crisis of underfunding and scrap the policies for which they have no mandate and not a scrap of public support. It might make the Secretary of State feel better, but it is no way for a Government in office for 12 years to defend their record.

Everyone knows, even if the Secretary of State does not, that underfunding in the NHS has caused long waiting lists. In 1979 there were 690,000 people on waiting lists. By March 1991 there were 900,000. *[Interruption.]* The all-party Select Committee on Health said that 23 per cent. of those waiting had been waiting for more than a year. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members can howl down the figures that I have produced, but they cannot howl down the pain, anguish and misery of all those people on waiting lists.

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady appears not to be giving way, in which case hon. Members should not persist.

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Ms. Harman: I will give way to the hon. Member for Lancaster (Dame E. Kellett-Bowman).

Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): Clearly the hon. Lady was not listening to the Secretary of State's opening speech. Had she been listening, she would have known that those thoroughly misleading figures that she has just given include day cases which were not totted up in those days. She is wholly wrong.

Ms. Harman: The Secretary of State and members of his party can try to sweep away the figures—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."]—but if they think that by denying the figures and nit-picking over them they can change the reality of long waiting lists, of which their constituents know, they are wrong. It will not work. All it does is convince their constituents that they are out of touch.

Long waiting lists leave patients in pain and misery and force many people, reluctantly, into the private sector. Many of those who go private feel that they have no alternative if they are to escape from the pain and inconvenience of an indefinite wait for treatment. They do not feel that they are exercising their choice. They feel angry that, despite having paid through their tax and their national insurance for their health care, they cannot get the treatment when they need it. Those who cannot afford to go private feel angry, too, because they know that, if they could pay again, they could see the same doctor, in the same hospital, for the same operation, in the same week. The Secretary of State might not call that privatisation, but that is what the people who are suffering call it.

My hon. Friends the Members for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) and for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) have said that people are being driven into the private sector because of underfunding. That underfunding has caused district health authorities to cut hospital beds. No doubt the Secretary of State will deny those figures as well, but bed closures have contributed to the huge waiting lists. Since 1979, the NHS has lost 27,000 acute beds. How can it be a sign of modernisation for the NHS to cut the number of its beds but, at the same time, for the private sector to increase its number of beds?

Since 1979 the NHS has suffered the closure of 531 hospitals, the disappearance of one acute hospital bed in five, a backlog of maintenance and repairs equivalent to £1·5 billion and the cancellation of nearly 300,000 operations.

Mr. David Shaw (Dover): As a chartered accountant, I have listened with interest to the figures that the hon. Lady has quoted. Can she quote the real figure in which my constituents are interested? How much extra would a Labour Government put into the health service? Can she give us the real figure?

Ms. Harman: The difference between the next Labour Government and this Government—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."]—is that we believe that the NHS has been systematically underfunded for 12 years. We believe that that underfunding needs to be redressed, and we shall begin that task when we come into government. Even if the Government do not know that long waiting lists are causing people to be pushed into the private sector, the private health insurance companies do. They know that long waiting lists are their biggest——

Hon. Members: How much?

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let us settle down.

Ms. Harman: The private health insurance companies know that long waiting lists are forcing people into the private sector. The Secretary of State should look at the brochures of those companies; they talk about people going private because they cannot stand the pain and misery caused by long waiting lists.

The number of people going private has increased under this Government by 188 per cent., largely as a result of long waiting lists. Cash-starved district health authorities are forced into deals with private health care companies to finance new buildings and equipment that they otherwise could not afford. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Hughes) quoted the example of Grampian health board, which built a 60-bed unit that now must be run by the private sector.

Today we have again discussed opting out. Once again Conservative Members have tried to peddle the myth that opting out is simply a benign form of devolved management and that no one need worry about it. That is absolute nonsense.

Mr. Thurnham: Will the hon. Lady withdraw her bogus allegation of 330,000 cancelled operations? How on earth did she arrive at that figure, which is simply a wild estimate that has been denounced by health authorities throughout the country? It is wrong, and this is a meaningless, shoddy exercise.

Ms. Harman: Those figures are absolutely accurate. If the hon. Gentleman checks *Hansard* for February this year he will see a question from one of my hon. Friends asking how many operations were cancelled last year. The Minister of State's answer gave a figure of about 300,000. If it was all right for the Government to calculate the figures on that basis in February, why is it not all right for us to do so in October? The only thing that has changed is that we are nearer an election and the Government are frightened.

Mr. Robert B. Jones (Hertfordshire, West): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms. Harman: No, I shall not give way again——

Mr. Peter Hardy (Wentworth): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms. Harman: —except to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Hardy: My hon. Friend mentioned opting out. She will be aware that the Government can have no mandate to implement opt-out in South Yorkshire. Is my hon. Friend aware that, despite the fact that the vast majority of people in South Yorkshire thought that the consultation exercise was a waste of time, the overwhelming majority of responses received on the opting out of the South Yorkshire ambulance service were strongly opposed to it? Only four organisations, consisting largely of Tory placemen, offered any support. However, the document that I suspect the Government received on that showed a fraudulent entry that was later tipp-exed out. That reduced by six the number of organisations which supported the proposal. In view of that publication, will my hon. Friend, even at this late stage, invite the Minister to reconsider that fraudulent application?

Ms. Harman: On the basis of the important point that my hon. Friend has made, I hope that the Minister will reconsider the opting out described by my hon. Friend.

People are opposed to opting out because they know that it is not just devolved management. If the Government had wanted to devolve management, they could have done so 12 years ago and it would not have needed legislation. They could have simply done it through the Department of Health. People are against opting out because they know that it severs the link between their hospital and the local community that that hospital serves. They know that it also severs the link between hospitals and the Department of Health, which has responsibility for national strategic planning of the health service.

People are against opting out because they know that the national health service no longer owns its land or hospitals, nor employs the staff. The land, buildings, equipment and contracts of employment are passed over by statute from the Secretary of State to the boards of directors of the hospitals. Those boards of directors can decide whether to sell the land or to hire or fire the staff, and can decide what work the staff do and for whom. They can decide whether to carry out or increase private practice.

May I quote a leaked internal document from the North-West Thames regional health authority? Such documents remain secret. It says enthusiastically that, if Harefield hospital opts out, the prospects will be good for private patient work. It enthuses that opportunities may also exist to increase the work load of Harefield at the expense of other local hospitals. However, it warns that there may be a danger of a cartel, with the Brompton national heart hospital taking the work away from Harefield. That is the language of commerce and business. It is the priority of the marketplace rather than of patient care.

People know that nursing care has already been privatised with a massive public subsidy so that people who used to be able to receive care in geriatric wards or cottage hospitals have no choice but to go to private nursing homes which have been funded by the public sector. There was a 21,000 per cent. increase in the amount of public subsidy for private nursing homes between 1979 and 1990. It rose from £2·5 million in 1979 to £530 million in 1990. That money could have been spent in national health service nursing homes. People do not want to use up their life savings as they are pushed out of acute hospitals into private nursing care with no choice about where to go.

People know that dental charges are pushing dentistry out of the NHS and into the private sector. Dental charges have doubled in the past 10 years, and in some parts of the country it is difficult to find an NHS dentist who will take NHS patients. Eye tests, which provide an important screening service, must be paid for in full except by people who are means-tested or have certain conditions.

The Secretary of State would do well to recognise that it is the combination of long waiting lists, high charges, privatisation in dentistry and nursing homes, and private wings in NHS hospitals that convinces people that the NHS is under threat from the Government. It is because we are concerned about what is happening that we shall redress NHS underfunding, commercialisation and privatisation. In the lifetime of one Parliament, a Labour Government will redress the underfunding which has caused the present financial crisis in the national health service.

Performance agreements for each health authority will include the reduction of waiting lists and times. We shall set up a task force to tackle waiting list black spots and do what a Select Committee on Health wanted the Government to do, but which the Government refused: set up an investigation into the link between waiting lists and the amount of private practice. We shall bring opted-out hospitals back within district health authorities and end the internal market in which district health authorities and hospitals have to buy and sell services. It is no good— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let us proceed in good order.

Ms. Harman: It is no good the Secretary of State or the Prime Minister making promises or declarations—people will not believe them, but will judge for themselves on their own experience. Government allegations against us will simply convince people that the Government are hopelessly out of touch.

9.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Stephen Dorrell): This was the debate that the Labour party did not want to have—and from its point of view, it was entirely right, because the debate has exposed the hollowness of Labour Members' claim to be interested in the health service.

The initial effect of listening to Labour spokesmen talking about their policies reminds me of nothing so much as looking at an elaborate operatic set. The initial impact is undeniably impressive, but it relies for its effect on ingenious lighting which obscures the detail and on clever choreography which insists that the actors walk with care so as to preserve the illusion of solidity. One wrong step by any of the Labour spokesmen on that set ensures that the whole edifice collapses amid the sound of ripping canvas and splintering timber. That is the spectacle to which the House was treated earlier this afternoon.

Let us look first at underfunding. I have some sympathy with the hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook). After all, he was dealt a wholly impossible brief by his shadow Cabinet colleagues. His brief was to tell the National Association of Health Authorities and Trusts that Labour promised it £4·5 billion, at the same time as telling the British Medical Association that Labour promised it £6 billion, at the same time as the right hon. and learned Member for Monklands, East (Mr. Smith) was going around the prawn cocktail circuit saying that Labour made no pledge at all about health expenditure.

Today, the hon. Member for Livingston finally crashed off the set that he had created and let the cat out of the bag. He committed Labour on expenditure in the following words: "We have done it before, and we will do it again just like last time." As my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Morris) reminded us, those are chilling words indeed to anyone on an NHS waiting list or looking for care in an NHS hospital.

I will remind the hon. Gentleman what "just like last time" means. Last time, Labour increased health expenditure by 3·1 per cent. on average in real terms each year it was in office. Three per cent. is a figure to which the Labour party appears to be attached, because in the 1987 general election the Leader of the Opposition, the person so touchingly referred to yesterday by the hon. Member for Livingston as the ultimate authority, their leader, committed the Labour party in the course of this Parliament to increasing expenditure on health by 3 per cent. per year in real terms.

The problem for the hon. Gentleman is that 3·1 per cent., the record between 1974 and 1979 and the commitment of the Leader of the Opposition at the last election, is precisely the record of this Government every

[Mr. Stephen Dorrell]

year since 1979. Despite all the alarums and excursions, the hon. Member for Livingston has failed to open any difference between his commitments and our record.

I do not dispute for one moment what the hon. Gentleman and his predecessors between 1974 and 1979 would like to have done. The difficulty was that the International Monetary Fund refused to pay the bill. The hon. Gentleman's commitment is to do it again just like last time, but the real issue, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) reminded us, is not money—it is management.

Mr. Geoffrey Lofthouse (Pontefract and Castleford): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Dorrell: Once, and then no more.

Mr. Lofthouse: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that consultants at Pontefract general infirmary informed me that they have been warned by the health authority not to "over-market"? They must leave room to attract customers from outside the authority's area so as to attract money. Is he further aware that I recently received a letter from three consultants informing me that, due to underfunding, my constituents are receiving what they describe as sub-standard service? Does he not believe them?

Mr. Dorrell: Before leaving the subject of underfunding, I will simply observe that a party which says that we are underfunding the health service should have an idea of the amount of the underfunding. It should also give a clear commitment to the electorate about what it would do about underfunding if elected to government.

The hon. Member for Livingston suggests that we should study the record of the Labour Government of 1974-79. I am happy to do so. I shall look at the way in which resources have been used in the health service. Those resources grew at exactly the same rate between 1974 and 1979 as they have grown under this Government since 1979.

Between 1974 and 1979, in-patient treatments rose at an average yearly rate of less than 1 per cent. Since 1979, they have risen at an average of more than 2 per cent. per year. Between 1974 and 1979, in-patient waiting lists rose by nearly half—by 48 per cent. Since 1979, they have fallen by 8 per cent. Between 1974 and 1979, bearing in mind that resources grew at the same rate in that Parliament as they have done since, capital expenditure on new health equipment and buildings in the NHS fell by 28 per cent. Since 1979, that same capital expenditure has risen by 68 per cent. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield rightly said, the issue is management—how resources are used within the national health service.

I shall now deal with the issues raised by the hon. Member for Peckham (Ms. Harman)——

Mr. Bob Cryer (Bradford, South): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dorrell: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will wish to sit down so that I can answer the questions asked by his hon. Friend.

The hon. Member for Peckham expressed concern about the decline in the number of acute beds in the national health service. I will read an extract from *The Times*, which states:

> "Some press reports have given the impression that hospital closures are evidence that our health service is being run down and is doing less for patients . . . That is just not true, in many cases new and efficient buildings are replacing antiquated ones . . . I make no apology for the policy of closing hospitals that are no longer needed. Under-used beds cost money that could be better spent elsewhere."

Those are not my words but the words of Lord Ennals when he held the office now held by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

The 1974-79 Labour Government recognised, as we have recognised, that a modern health service needs fewer acute beds to treat more patients. Under Labour, acute bed space fell by 1·2 per cent. per annum between 1974 and 1979 for exactly the same reason as it has continued to fall since 1979.

The key question is how Labour, if elected to office, would improve the management of the national health service. Labour Front Bench spokesmen have shown precious little interest in that issue. They prefer to spread the privatisation smear, even though they now recognise that the smear does not work. They started by saying that we intend to privatise the health service. They have been convinced that that smear is unworkable and now want to use the growth of charges to create the impression of what they are pleased to call creeping privatisation. That charge does not work either, because my right hon. Friend has drawn attention to an inconvenient detail—that a policy of creeping privatisation by extending charging would be against the law.

The legislation under which the NHS works is perfectly clear. Section 1(2) of the National Health Service Act 1977 states:

> "The services so provided shall be free of charge except in so far as the making and recovery of charges is expressly provided for by"

that or another enactment. Three specific enactments allow charges, the first being the prescription charge which, as someone rightly said, was introduced by Labour. Secondly, there are opticians' and dentists' charges—also introduced by Labour. So far, that is 2:0 to Labour. Thirdly, charges for eye tests were introduced in 1988. By my mathematics, the extension of charging falls 2:1 to Labour.

Nothing daunted, the Labour Front Bench spokesmen went on to talk about nursing home charges, and nursing homes are an important issue. I had thought that the policy in the White Paper "Caring for People" was a bipartisan one. The Labour party is explicitly committed to supporting it, and it is under that policy that those who need nursing care are provided with it, in the community, in private sector nursing homes. That policy has abolished a waiting list that we inherited in 1979—that for part III accommodation, social care in local authorities.

The Labour party cannot accept the principle of any provision of any sort of care that is not provided in the public sector. Exactly the same principle informs its approach to pay beds. It now pursues a policy of removing pay beds from the health service, which would cut by £100 million the resources available for patient care.

Mr. Brian Wilson (Cunninghame, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dorrell: No.

The Labour party is also committed to a mimimum wage policy which will result in a further cut of £400 million in the resources available for patient care. It is committed to abolishing market testing, which will cut the amount available for patient care by £50 million.

Mr. Cryer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Dorrell: No. Then there will be—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Hon. Members must resume their seats, because the Minister has shown that he will not give way.

Mr. Dorrell: —a further cut of £300 million. That is £750 million-worth of cuts in patient care to which the Labour party is committed, and will introduce if it comes into office.

The hon. Member for Livingston made it clear yesterday that he remains committed to the absurd proposal of flexi-budgets, a proposal that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has rightly described as an unworkable mess. The Labour party has not thought it through and is not convincing. The one thing that is clear about flexi-budgets is that they would mean a return to funding health care institutions, rather than funding health authorities to buy the health care for the people in their areas. That will be of interest to those of my hon. Friends who represent constituencies that stand to gain from weighted capitation. My right hon. Friends the Members for Blackpool, South (Sir P. Blaker) and for Finchley (Mrs. M. Thatcher) and my hon. Friends the Members for Calder Valley (Mr. Thompson), for Norwich, North (Mr. Thompson, for Dudley, West (Dr. Blackburn), for Chorley (Mr. Dover) and for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Thurnham) all stand to lose as a result of the proposal to abolish weighted capitation.

Labour's policies are all of a piece. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield said, the Labour party has been consistent since 1979—it has opposed change and then accepted it. It opposed the sale of council houses, trade union reform and every cut in the standard rate of income tax. Now, it is Labour policy not to let the standard rate rise. As my right hon. Friend said, it opposed general managers in the NHS, the limited list and market testing, although it had introduced that in Liverpool. They are a good Opposition. They have learnt how to run scare stories without committing themselves, but to govern is to choose and they are unfit to govern because they are unwilling to choose.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 209, Noes 303.

Division No. 331] **[10 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley, N.)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald
Archer, Rt Hon Peter
Armstrong, Hilary
Ashley, Rt Hon Jack
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony *(Newham NW)*
Barnes, Harry *(Derbyshire NE)*
Barnes, Mrs Rosie *(Greenwich)*
Battle, John
Bell, Stuart
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, A. F. *(D'nt'n & R'dish)*
Benton, Joseph
Bermingham, Gerald
Bidwell, Sydney
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Boyes, Roland
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, Gordon *(D'mline E)*
Brown, Nicholas *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Ron *(Edinburgh Leith)*
Caborn, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Ron *(Blyth Valley)*
Campbell-Savours, D. N.
Canavan, Dennis
Clark, Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Tom *(Monklands W)*
Clay, Bob
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Cohen, Harry
Cook, Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crowther, Stan
Cryer, Bob
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Dr John
Darling, Alistair
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H'l)*
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Douglas, Dick
Dunwoody, Hon Mrs Gwyneth
Eadie, Alexander
Eastham, Ken
Edwards, Huw
Evans, John *(St Helens N)*
Ewing, Harry *(Falkirk E)*
Field, Frank *(Birkenhead)*
Fields, Terry *(L'pool B G'n)*
Fisher, Mark
Flannery, Martin
Flynn, Paul
Foot, Rt Hon Michael
Foster, Derek
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Garrett, John *(Norwich South)*
Garrett, Ted *(Wallsend)*
Gilbert, Rt Hon Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A.
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mildred
Gould, Bryan
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie *(Tottenham)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hain, Peter
Hardy, Peter
Harman, Ms Harriet
Hattersley, Rt Hon Roy
Haynes, Frank
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate *(Vauxhall)*
Hogg, N. *(C'nauld & Kilsyth)*
Home Robertson, John
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howell, Rt Hon D. *(S'heath)*
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, John *(Coventry NE)*
Hughes, Robert *(Aberdeen N)*
Hughes, Roy *(Newport E)*
Ingram, Adam
Janner, Greville
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S W)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Kilfoyle, Peter
Lambie, David
Leadbitter, Ted
Leighton, Ron
Lestor, Joan *(Eccles)*
Lewis, Terry
Litherland, Robert
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Stretford)*
Lofthouse, Geoffrey
Loyden, Eddie
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Ian
Macdonald, Calum A.
McFall, John
McKay, Allen *(Barnsley West)*
McKelvey, William
McLeish, Henry
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
McWilliam, John
Madden, Max
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martin, Michael J. *(Springburn)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheffield Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin *(G't Grimsby)*
Molyneaux, Rt Hon James
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morris, Rt Hon A. *(W'shawe)*
Morris, Rt Hon J. *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Nellist, Dave
Oakes, Rt Hon Gordon
O'Brien, William
O'Hara, Edward
O'Neill, Martin
Orme, Rt Hon Stanley
Owen, Rt Hon Dr David
Parry, Robert
Patchett, Terry
Pendry, Tom
Pike, Peter L.
Prescott, John
Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Redmond, Martin
Rees, Rt Hon Merlyn
Reid, Dr John
Richardson, Jo
Robertson, George
Robinson, Geoffrey
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terence
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(Londonderry E)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Joan
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shore, Rt Hon Peter
Short, Clare
Sillars, Jim
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, C. *(Isl'ton & F'bury)*
Smith, Rt Hon J. *(Monk'ds E)*
Smith, J. P. *(Vale of Glam)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive

Steinberg, Gerry
Stott, Roger
Strang, Gavin
Straw, Jack
Taylor, Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Thompson, Jack *(Wansbeck)*
Turner, Dennis
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Joan
Wardell, Gareth *(Gower)*
Wareing, Robert N.
Welsh, Michael *(Doncaster N)*
Wigley, Dafydd

Williams, Rt Hon Alan
Williams, Alan W. *(Carm'then)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wise, Mrs Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Young, David *(Bolton SE)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Ray Powell and
Mr. Eric Illsley.

NOES

Adley, Robert
Aitken, Jonathan
Alison, Rt Hon Michael
Allason, Rupert
Amery, Rt Hon Julian
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Arnold, Sir Thomas
Ashby, David
Aspinwall, Jack
Atkins, Robert
Atkinson, David
Baker, Nicholas *(Dorset N)*
Baldry, Tony
Batiste, Spencer
Beaumont-Dark, Anthony
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Bennett, Nicholas *(Pembroke)*
Bevan, David Gilroy
Biffen, Rt Hon John
Blackburn, Dr John G.
Blaker, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Bottomley, Mrs Virginia
Bowden, A. *(Brighton K'pto'n)*
Bowden, Gerald *(Dulwich)*
Bowis, John
Boyson, Rt Hon Dr Sir Rhodes
Braine, Rt Hon Sir Bernard
Brandon-Bravo, Martin
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Graham
Brown, Michael *(Brigg & Cl't's)*
Bruce, Ian *(Dorset South)*
Buck, Sir Antony
Budgen, Nicholas
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Chris
Carlisle, John, *(Luton N)*
Carlisle, Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Cash, William
Chalker, Rt Hon Mrs Lynda
Channon, Rt Hon Paul
Chapman, Sydney
Chope, Christopher
Churchill, Mr
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Plymouth)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochford)*
Clark, Rt Hon Sir William
Clarke, Rt Hon K. *(Rushcliffe)*
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F'rest)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Rt Hon Sir John
Couchman, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina
Davies, Q. *(Stamf'd & Spald'g)*

Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Devlin, Tim
Dickens, Geoffrey
Dicks, Terry
Dorrell, Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Eggar, Tim
Emery, Sir Peter
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatf'd)*
Evennett, David
Fairbairn, Sir Nicholas
Fallon, Michael
Farr, Sir John
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Finsberg, Sir Geoffrey
Fishburn, John Dudley
Fookes, Dame Janet
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Sir Marcus
Franks, Cecil
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Peter
Gale, Roger
Gardiner, Sir George
Gill, Christopher
Gilmour, Rt Hon Sir Ian
Glyn, Dr Sir Alan
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, John
Grant, Sir Anthony *(CambsSW)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Gregory, Conal
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Grist, Ian
Ground, Patrick
Grylls, Michael
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Jeremy
Hannam, John
Hargreaves, A. *(B'ham H'll Gr')*
Hargreaves, Ken *(Hyndburn)*
Harris, David
Hawkins, Christopher
Hayes, Jerry
Hayhoe, Rt Hon Sir Barney
Hayward, Robert
Heath, Rt Hon Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hicks, Mrs Maureen *(Wolv' NE)*
Higgins, Rt Hon Terence L.
Hill, James
Hind, Kenneth
Hogg, Hon Douglas *(Gr'th'm)*

Hordern, Sir Peter
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'd-on-A)*
Howarth, G. *(Cannock & B'wd)*
Howell, Rt Hon David *(G'dford)*
Howell, Ralph *(North Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G. *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Irvine, Michael
Irving, Sir Charles
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert
Janman, Tim
Jessel, Toby
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(Herts W)*
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
Key, Robert
King, Roger *(B'ham N'thfield)*
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Greg *(Derby North)*
Knowles, Michael
Knox, David
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lang, Rt Hon Ian
Latham, Michael
Lawrence, Ivan
Lee, John *(Pendle)*
Leigh, Edward *(Gainsbor'gh)*
Lennox-Boyd, Hon Mark
Lester, Jim *(Broxtowe)*
Lloyd, Sir Ian *(Havant)*
Lloyd, Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luce, Rt Hon Sir Richard
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew *(E Berkshire)*
Maclean, David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNair-Wilson, Sir Michael
McNair-Wilson, Sir Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Mans, Keith
Maples, John
Marland, Paul
Marshall, John *(Hendon S)*
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Dr Brian
Maxwell-Hyslop, Robin
Mayhew, Rt Hon Sir Patrick
Mellor, Rt Hon David
Miller, Sir Hal
Mills, Iain
Miscampbell, Norman
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David
Moate, Roger
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Moore, Rt Hon John
Morris, M *(N'hampton S)*
Morrison, Sir Charles
Morrison, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Moss, Malcolm
Mudd, David
Neale, Sir Gerrard
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Rt Hon Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Nicholson, Emma *(Devon West)*
Norris, Steve
Onslow, Rt Hon Cranley

Oppenheim, Phillip
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Parkinson, Rt Hon Cecil
Patnick, Irvine
Patten, Rt Hon John
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Porter, Barry *(Wirral S)*
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Portillo, Michael
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Price, Sir David
Raison, Rt Hon Sir Timothy
Redwood, John
Renton, Rt Hon Tim
Rhodes James, Sir Robert
Riddick, Graham
Ridley, Rt Hon Nicholas
Rifkind, Rt Hon Malcolm
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rossi, Sir Hugh
Rost, Peter
Rowe, Andrew
Rumbold, Rt Hon Mrs Angela
Ryder, Rt Hon Richard
Sackville, Hon Tom
Sayeed, Jonathan
Scott, Rt Hon Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shelton, Sir William
Shephard, Mrs G. *(Norfolk SW)*
Shepherd, Colin *(Hereford)*
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Shersby, Michael
Sims, Roger
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsfield)*
Soames, Hon Nicholas
Speed, Keith
Speller, Tony
Spicer, Sir Jim *(Dorset W)*
Spicer, Michael *(S Worcs)*
Squire, Robin
Stanbrook, Ivor
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stern, Michael
Stevens, Lewis
Stewart, Allan *(Eastwood)*
Stewart, Andy *(Sherwood)*
Stewart, Rt Hon Sir Ian
Stokes, Sir John
Sumberg, David
Summerson, Hugo
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tebbit, Rt Hon Norman
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thompson, D. *(Calder Valley)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thorne, Neil
Thurnham, Peter
Tracey, Richard
Tredinnick, David
Trippier, David
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, Rt Hon William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(T'side North)*
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*
Watts, John

Wells, Bowen
Wheeler, Sir John
Whitney, Ray
Widdecombe, Ann
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann
Wolfson, Mark

Wood, Timothy
Woodcock, Dr. Mike
Yeo, Tim
Young, Sir George *(Acton)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Lightbown and
Mr. John M. Taylor.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 224.

Division No. 232] **[10.15pm**

AYES

Adley, Robert
Aitken, Jonathan
Alison, Rt Hon Michael
Allason, Rupert
Amery, Rt Hon Julian
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, James
Arnold, Jacques *(Gravesham)*
Arnold, Sir Thomas
Ashby, David
Aspinwall, Jack
Atkins, Robert
Atkinson, David
Baker, Nicholas *(Dorset N)*
Baldry, Tony
Batiste, Spencer
Beaumont-Dark, Anthony
Bellingham, Henry
Bendall, Vivian
Bennett, Nicholas *(Pembroke)*
Bevan, David Gilroy
Biffen, Rt Hon John
Blackburn, Dr John G.
Blaker, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Body, Sir Richard
Bonsor, Sir Nicholas
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Bottomley, Mrs Virginia
Bowden, A. *(Brighton K'pto'n)*
Bowden, Gerald *(Dulwich)*
Bowis, John
Boyson, Rt Hon Dr Sir Rhodes
Braine, Rt Hon Sir Bernard
Brandon-Bravo, Martin
Brazier, Julian
Bright, Graham
Brown, Michael *(Brigg & Cl't's)*
Bruce, Ian *(Dorset South)*
Buck, Sir Antony
Budgen, Nicholas
Burns, Simon
Burt, Alistair
Butcher, John
Butler, Chris
Carlisle, John, *(Luton N)*
Carlisle, Kenneth *(Lincoln)*
Carrington, Matthew
Cash, William
Chalker, Rt Hon Mrs Lynda
Channon, Rt Hon Paul
Chapman, Sydney
Chope, Christopher
Churchill, Mr
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Plymouth)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rochford)*
Clark, Rt Hon Sir William
Clarke, Rt Hon K. *(Rushcliffe)*
Conway, Derek
Coombs, Anthony *(Wyre F'rest)*
Coombs, Simon *(Swindon)*
Cope, Rt Hon Sir John
Couchman, James
Currie, Mrs Edwina

Davies, Q. *(Stamf'd & Spald'g)*
Davis, David *(Boothferry)*
Day, Stephen
Devlin, Tim
Dickens, Geoffrey
Dicks, Terry
Dorrell, Stephen
Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James
Dover, Den
Dunn, Bob
Durant, Sir Anthony
Eggar, Tim
Emery, Sir Peter
Evans, David *(Welwyn Hatf'd)*
Evennett, David
Fairbairn, Sir Nicholas
Fallon, Michael
Farr, Sir John
Fenner, Dame Peggy
Field, Barry *(Isle of Wight)*
Finsberg, Sir Geoffrey
Fishburn, John Dudley
Fookes, Dame Janet
Forth, Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Sir Marcus
Franks, Cecil
Freeman, Roger
French, Douglas
Fry, Peter
Gale, Roger
Gardiner, Sir George
Gill, Christopher
Gilmour, Rt Hon Sir Ian
Glyn, Dr Sir Alan
Goodlad, Alastair
Goodson-Wickes, Dr Charles
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorst, John
Grant, Sir Anthony *(CambsSW)*
Greenway, Harry *(Ealing N)*
Greenway, John *(Ryedale)*
Gregory, Conal
Griffiths, Peter *(Portsmouth N)*
Grist, Ian
Ground, Patrick
Grylls, Michael
Hamilton, Neil *(Tatton)*
Hampson, Dr Keith
Hanley, Jeremy
Hannam, John
Hargreaves, A. *(B'ham H'll Gr')*
Hargreaves, Ken *(Hyndburn)*
Harris, David
Hawkins, Christopher
Hayes, Jerry
Hayhoe, Rt Hon Sir Barney
Hayward, Robert
Heath, Rt Hon Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hicks, Mrs Maureen *(Wolv' NE)*
Higgins, Rt Hon Terence L.
Hill, James

Hind, Kenneth
Hogg, Hon Douglas *(Gr'th'm)*
Hordern, Sir Peter
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Alan *(Strat'd-on-A)*
Howarth, G. *(Cannock & B'wd)*
Howell, Rt Hon David *(G'dford)*
Howell, Ralph *(North Norfolk)*
Hughes, Robert G. *(Harrow W)*
Hunt, Rt Hon David
Hunt, Sir John *(Ravensbourne)*
Hunter, Andrew
Irvine, Michael
Irving, Sir Charles
Jack, Michael
Jackson, Robert
Janman, Tim
Jessel, Toby
Jones, Gwilym *(Cardiff N)*
Jones, Robert B *(Herts W)*
Kellett-Bowman, Dame Elaine
Key, Robert
King, Roger *(B'ham N'thfield)*
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkhope, Timothy
Knapman, Roger
Knight, Greg *(Derby North)*
Knowles, Michael
Knox, David
Lamont, Rt Hon Norman
Lang, Rt Hon Ian
Latham, Michael
Lawrence, Ivan
Lee, John *(Pendle)*
Leigh, Edward *(Gainsbor'gh)*
Lennox-Boyd, Hon Mark
Lester, Jim *(Broxtowe)*
Lloyd, Sir Ian *(Havant)*
Lloyd, Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael
Luce, Rt Hon Sir Richard
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Andrew *(E Berkshire)*
Maclean, David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNair-Wilson, Sir Michael
McNair-Wilson, Sir Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Mans, Keith
Maples, John
Marland, Paul
Marshall, John *(Hendon S)*
Marshall, Sir Michael *(Arundel)*
Martin, David *(Portsmouth S)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Dr Brian
Maxwell-Hyslop, Robin
Mayhew, Rt Hon Sir Patrick
Mellor, Rt Hon David
Miller, Sir Hal
Mills, Iain
Miscampbell, Norman
Mitchell, Andrew *(Gedling)*
Mitchell, Sir David
Moate, Roger
Montgomery, Sir Fergus
Moore, Rt Hon John
Morris, M *(N'hampton S)*
Morrison, Sir Charles
Morrison, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Moss, Malcolm
Mudd, David
Neale, Sir Gerrard
Nelson, Anthony
Neubert, Sir Michael
Newton, Rt Hon Tony
Nicholls, Patrick
Nicholson, David *(Taunton)*
Nicholson, Emma *(Devon West)*

Norris, Steve
Onslow, Rt Hon Cranley
Oppenheim, Phillip
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Parkinson, Rt Hon Cecil
Patnick, Irvine
Patten, Rt Hon John
Pattie, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Pawsey, James
Porter, Barry *(Wirral S)*
Porter, David *(Waveney)*
Portillo, Michael
Powell, William *(Corby)*
Price, Sir David
Raison, Rt Hon Sir Timothy
Redwood, John
Renton, Rt Hon Tim
Rhodes James, Sir Robert
Riddick, Graham
Rifkind, Rt Hon Malcolm
Roberts, Rt Hon Sir Wyn
Roe, Mrs Marion
Rossi, Sir Hugh
Rost, Peter
Rowe, Andrew
Rumbold, Rt Hon Mrs Angela
Ryder, Rt Hon Richard
Sackville, Hon Tom
Sayeed, Jonathan
Scott, Rt Hon Nicholas
Shaw, David *(Dover)*
Shaw, Sir Giles *(Pudsey)*
Shelton, Sir William
Shephard, Mrs G. *(Norfolk SW)*
Shepherd, Colin *(Hereford)*
Shepherd, Richard *(Aldridge)*
Shersby, Michael
Sims, Roger
Skeet, Sir Trevor
Smith, Sir Dudley *(Warwick)*
Smith, Tim *(Beaconsfield)*
Soames, Hon Nicholas
Speed, Keith
Speller, Tony
Spicer, Sir Jim *(Dorset W)*
Spicer, Michael *(S Worcs)*
Squire, Robin
Stanbrook, Ivor
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stern, Michael
Stevens, Lewis
Stewart, Allan *(Eastwood)*
Stewart, Andy *(Sherwood)*
Stewart, Rt Hon Sir Ian
Stokes, Sir John
Sumberg, David
Summerson, Hugo
Taylor, Ian *(Esher)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tebbit, Rt Hon Norman
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thompson, D. *(Calder Valley)*
Thompson, Patrick *(Norwich N)*
Thorne, Neil
Thurnham, Peter
Tracey, Richard
Tredinnick, David
Trippier, David
Trotter, Neville
Twinn, Dr Ian
Vaughan, Sir Gerard
Viggers, Peter
Waldegrave, Rt Hon William
Walden, George
Walker, Bill *(T'side North)*
Waller, Gary
Ward, John
Wardle, Charles *(Bexhill)*

Wells, John
Wells, Bowen
Wheeler, Sir John
Whitney, Ray
Widdecombe, Ann
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann
Wolfson, Mark
Wood, Timothy
Woodcock, Dr. Mike
Yeo, Tim
Young, Sir George (*Acton*)

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Lightbown and
Mr. John M. Taylor.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene (*Paisley, N.*)
Allen, Graham
Alton, David
Anderson, Donald
Archer, Rt Hon Peter
Armstrong, Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashley, Rt Hon Jack
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony (*Newham NW*)
Barnes, Harry (*Derbyshire NE*)
Barnes, Mrs Rosie (*Greenwich*)
Battle, John
Beith, A. J.
Bell, Stuart
Bellotti, David
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, A. F. (*D'nt'n & R'dish*)
Benton, Joseph
Bermingham, Gerald
Bidwell, Sydney
Blunkett, David
Boateng, Paul
Boyes, Roland
Bradley, Keith
Bray, Dr Jeremy
Brown, Gordon (*D'mline E*)
Brown, Nicholas (*Newcastle E*)
Brown, Ron (*Edinburgh Leith*)
Caborn, Richard
Callaghan, Jim
Campbell, Ron (*Blyth Valley*)
Campbell-Savours, D. N.
Canavan, Dennis
Carlile, Alex (*Mont'g*)
Carr, Michael
Clark, Dr David (*S Shields*)
Clarke, Tom (*Monklands W*)
Clay, Bob
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Mrs Ann
Cohen, Harry
Cook, Robin (*Livingston*)
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crowther, Stan
Cryer, Bob
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Dr John
Darling, Alistair
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil (*Llanelli*)
Davies, Ron (*Caerphilly*)
Davis, Terry (*B'ham Hodge H'l*)
Dewar, Donald
Dixon, Don
Dobson, Frank
Douglas, Dick
Dunwoody, Hon Mrs Gwyneth
Eadie, Alexander
Eastham, Ken
Edwards, Huw
Evans, John (*St Helens N*)
Ewing, Harry (*Falkirk E*)
Fearn, Ronald
Field, Frank (*Birkenhead*)
Fields, Terry (*L'pool B G'n*)
Fisher, Mark
Flannery, Martin
Flynn, Paul
Foot, Rt Hon Michael
Foster, Derek
Foulkes, George
Fraser, John
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Garrett, John (*Norwich South*)
Garrett, Ted (*Wallsend*)
Gilbert, Rt Hon Dr John
Godman, Dr Norman A.
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mildred
Gould, Bryan
Graham, Thomas
Grant, Bernie (*Tottenham*)
Griffiths, Nigel (*Edinburgh S*)
Griffiths, Win (*Bridgend*)
Hain, Peter
Hardy, Peter
Harman, Ms Harriet
Hattersley, Rt Hon Roy
Haynes, Frank
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate (*Vauxhall*)
Hogg, N. (*C'nauld & Kilsyth*)
Home Robertson, John
Howarth, George (*Knowsley N*)
Howell, Rt Hon D. (*S'heath*)
Howells, Geraint
Hoyle, Doug
Hughes, John (*Coventry NE*)
Hughes, Robert (*Aberdeen N*)
Hughes, Roy (*Newport E*)
Hughes, Simon (*Southwark*)
Ingram, Adam
Janner, Greville
Jones, Barry (*Alyn & Deeside*)
Jones, Martyn (*Clwyd S W*)
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Kennedy, Charles
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Lambie, David
Leadbitter, Ted
Leighton, Ron
Lestor, Joan (*Eccles*)
Lewis, Terry
Litherland, Robert
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony (*Stretford*)
Lofthouse, Geoffrey
Loyden, Eddie
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Ian
Macdonald, Calum A.
McFall, John
McKay, Allen (*Barnsley West*)
McKelvey, William
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Robert
McMaster, Gordon
McNamara, Kevin
McWilliam, John
Madden, Max
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marek, Dr John
Marshall, David (*Shettleston*)
Marshall, Jim (*Leicester S*)
Martin, Michael J. (*Springburn*)
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill (*Sheffield Heeley*)
Mitchell, Austin (*G't Grimsby*)
Molyneaux, Rt Hon James
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Rhodri
Morris, Rt Hon A. (*W'shawe*)
Morris, Rt Hon J. (*Aberavon*)
Mowlam, Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul
Nellist, Dave
Oakes, Rt Hon Gordon
O'Brien, William
O'Hara, Edward
O'Neill, Martin
Orme, Rt Hon Stanley
Owen, Rt Hon Dr David
Parry, Robert
Patchett, Terry
Pendry, Tom
Pike, Peter L.
Prescott, John
Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Radice, Giles
Randall, Stuart
Redmond, Martin
Rees, Rt Hon Merlyn
Reid, Dr John
Richardson, Jo
Robertson, George
Robinson, Geoffrey
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terence
Ross, Ernie (*Dundee W*)
Ross, William (*Londonderry E*)
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Joan
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shore, Rt Hon Peter
Short, Clare
Sillars, Jim
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Andrew (*Oxford E*)
Smith, C. (*Isl'ton & F'bury*)
Smith, Rt Hon J. (*Monk'ds E*)
Smith, J. P. (*Vale of Glam*)
Smyth, Rev Martin (*Belfast S*)
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Steel, Rt Hon Sir David
Steinberg, Gerry
Stott, Roger
Strang, Gavin
Straw, Jack
Taylor, Mrs Ann (*Dewsbury*)
Thompson, Jack (*Wansbeck*)
Turner, Dennis
Vaz, Keith
Wallace, James
Walley, Joan
Wardell, Gareth (*Gower*)
Wareing, Robert N.
Welsh, Michael (*Doncaster N*)
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan
Williams, Alan W. (*Carm'then*)
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wise, Mrs Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, Jimmy
Young, David (*Bolton SE*)

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ray Powell and
Mr. Eric Illsley.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the record extra resources provided for the NHS and the substantial increase in the number of NHS patients treated since the Government came to office in 1979; supports the Government's reforms of the NHS which are already bringing about improvements in patient care; deplores the intellectual bankruptcy of Her Majesty's Opposition which, bereft of any coherent proposals of its own for the modernisation of the National Health Service, is reduced to peddling smears and scares which lower morale amongst NHS staff and cause wholly unnecessary fear amongst patients; notes with approval the Prime Minister's unequivocal statement on the NHS that there will be no charges for hospital treatment, no charges for visits to the doctor, no privatisation of health care, neither in part nor as a whole, now or in the future; and welcomes his unequivocal assurance that Trust hospitals remain a permanent part of the NHS.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Lords Amendment to the British Technology Group Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—[*Mr. Boswell.*]

Orders of the Day

British Technology Group Bill

Lords amendment considered.

Lords amendment: After clause 6, insert the following new clause—*Offers for sale of securities*—

"Where an offer for sale of any securities of the successor company is to be made by or on behalf of the Crown or any invitation or advertisement is to be issued by or on behalf of the Crown in connection with the offer, the Secretary of State shall consult such persons appearing to him to be representative of the universities of the United Kingdom as he considers appropriate."

Read a Second time.

Mr. Speaker: With this we will take amendments (a), (b) and (c) to the Lords amendment, and consequent Government amendments Nos. 1 and 2.

10.30 pm

Dr. Lewis Moonie (Kirkcaldy): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Lords amendment, amendment (a): in line 6, after 'universities', insert 'and research councils'.

We remain implacably opposed to the principles behind the Bill. We believe that it is ill conceived, and poses a real danger for the future of the British Technology Group. However, that is not the substance of our discussion tonight. I have to recognise that the House has already made its decision on the British Technology Group Bill. It therefore remains only for us to consider the Lords amendment and to see in what way it might be improved.

The Lords amendment, a cross-Bench amendment, was carried last week. As we can see from the amendment paper, the Government have agreed to accept it. It offers a small concession from the Government on the safeguards surrounding the sale that we attempted to have built into the Bill—that, before offering for sale any securities in the successor company

"the Secretary of State shall consult such persons appearing to him to be representative of the universities of the United Kingdom as he considers appropriate."

The purpose of our amendment is merely to tease out some additional concessions from the Government. As they have been decent enough to accept this small amendment, they might be broad-spirited enough to consider some further improvements to the Bill.

Our amendment (a) seeks to insert "and research councils" after universities. That is self-explanatory. We seek to broaden slightly, and only slightly, the terms of consultation which have already been agreed in principle. In amendment (b) we have attempted to specify some of the information about which universities should be consulted. After all, in theory it is possible for the Government to phone the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, tell it that they are selling securities and call that consultation. I am sure that, being a decent man, the Under-Secretary would not dream of doing anything so underhand and out of keeping with the spirit of the Lords amendment. Nevertheless, we feel that it would be valuable to add this additional safeguard.

Amendment (c) is also self-explanatory. We feel that the Secretary of State ought to allow a reasonable period for consultation on the Bill and have suggested a period of three months to allow the Bill to be gone into in proper detail.

Much of the argument in Committee, in both this House and another place, dealt with the independence, integrity and impartiality of the British Technology Group following any privatisation. To some extent, the Government have met those concerns. Indeed, in Committee I remember the Under-Secretary saying clearly that he intended to safeguard those three important principles. He appears to have done so in two ways. One is by certain inclusions in the articles of association. He has certainly tried to do so. The other is by accepting the Lords amendment.

I should be grateful if he would spend a few minutes looking at those principles in tandem with the articles of association and explain to the House how he feels that his objectives have been achieved. There was no disagreement on those objectives in Committee, merely considerable discussion of how they might be achieved.

In conclusion, I reiterate that we are opposed to the sale in principle. Should the Bill not go through before a change of Government, which happily will occur in the next six months, we will certainly reverse the proposal. If the reports in the press are accurate, it may well be that a rather more interventionist Secretary of State is about to be chosen to see out the twilight of this Administration, in which case we might see changes in the Bill before then. Who knows? I am sure that neither the Minister for Corporate Affairs nor the Under-Secretary of State would welcome that. I ask that Under-Secretary to give some explanation of how he thinks that those important safeguards have been handled.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Industry and Consumer Affairs (Mr. Edward Leigh): I am grateful for the constructive spirit in which the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy (Dr. Moonie) moved his amendment. He is right that there is no agreement on the principle of privatisation, but that matter has been well aired in this Chamber, and we do not need to go over that ground again. Both sides of the Chamber are united in the firm hope that the impartiality, independence and integrity of the British Technology Group can be retained. I give a commitment on behalf of the Government that we are fully committed to those three Is. The concessions made in the House of Lords will allay any residual concerns in those areas.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the articles of association. There are two key provisions in the articles of association protected by the special share. These are, first, a 15 per cent. limit on individual shareholdings, which will continue in the articles even after the special share is redeemed at the end of five years. The Government will be prepared to consider higher individual shareholdings, should that prove necessary, to attract the right consortium, but we are looking at a benchmark of some 15 per cent. The second is a restriction on substantial disposals of assets above a certain level—25 per cent. of net assets or of the income raised by the assets disposed—without the special shareholder's consent.

In addition, there are two further safeguards in the articles of association. The first is a provision for one director of the company to be directly appointed by the universities in consultation with the polytechnics. The universities will thus have the power of appointment to the board, in contrast with the current situation, in which universities have no right of representation on the present board. Secondly, one director, in addition to the